

EXCITING ADVENTURES IN THE WORLDS OF TOMORROW!



VOLUME 13
NUMBER 6

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

JUNE
1951

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**WHOM the GODS
WOULD SLAY...**

By IVAR JORGENSEN



A THRILL-PACKED TALE OF EARTH'S FIRST INVADERS!

MEN BEHIND *fantastic* ADVENTURES



down with salmon, perch, minnow and other freshwater fish abounding in the fjords, as well as the herring and mackerel from the open sea off the Haugesund port. I remember vividly the smell—of the water, the fish, the boat. My inherent love for the sea came to the fore in those early years.

After my father was drowned—in one of those death-dealing tidal currents prevalent in that part of Norway—my mother brought the family to the United States—to a small town in Wisconsin. I was only about eight years old at this time, and it was fun getting acclimated to the new life. Learning the language, the customs,

Author of: "WHOM THE GODS WOULD SLAY"

THIS IS MY first attempt at writing autobiography, and it doesn't come easy. I was born thirty-five years ago come next November. My ancestral home is a small cottage in a little community near the port town of Haugesund, in the province of Rogland, in Norway. The chief trade in our town is fishing—and my father was an expert at his trade. I remember as a boy of five and six and seven, going out with him on the little schooner, and helping to haul in the big nets weighted

even the food—everything was an experience to be savored.

It wasn't until I got to college—where I took my degree in civil engineering—that I became acquainted with science-fiction-fantasy. I picked it up originally as something to read just to get away from the logarithm tables that were keeping me up nights—and before long, found myself completely absorbed with this type of fiction. It put me in mind of the tales the women of my village

(Continued On Page 128)

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Published monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. Editorial—New York Office, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y. Copyright under International Copyright Convention. Entered as second class matter June 3, 1947 at the Post Office, Chicago, Illinois under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry, Holyoke, Massachusetts. Subscription: In U. S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America, and U. S. Possessions \$2.50 for 12 issues, all other foreign countries, \$2.50 for 12 issues. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.



All Stories Complete

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WHOM THE GODS WOULD SLAY (Novel—35,000) by Ivar Jorgensen 8

Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers

Lall loved men, and to prove it, had five husbands at a time. But it was after she tired of them that they got their greatest reward: the kiss — of death!

"YOU CAN'T SEE ME!" (Short—7,500) by William F. Temple 64

Illustrated by Gerald Hohns

"I like to talk to myself. It's so interesting and stimulating." Did you ever hear somebody say that? Maybe it isn't as crazy as it sounds. Why not try it sometime?

CONDITIONED REFLEX (Short-short—1,500) by William P. McGivern 78

Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers

What would you do if the face of God suddenly appeared in the sky looking as if it were about to speak? Would you dismiss it as a promotional stunt—or try to listen?

THE BRAIN THAT LOST ITS HEAD (Short-short—2,100) by Alfred Coppel 82

Illustrated by Henry Sharp

The Brain was a genius—the sum total of all man's learning housed in one gigantic mechanism. How, then, could even the most stupid of humans know more than it did?

THREE AGAINST THE ROOM (Novellette—19,500) by Robert Moore Williams 88

Illustrated by Robert Gibson Jonas

This slender weakling of a blue man could bring to heel the deadly gulfews—dinosauric creatures from Earth's past. So why should he fear the apparently ordinary Rooms?

Front cover painting by Walter H. Hinton, suggested by

a scene from "Whom the Gods Would Slay"

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

IF THE song "The Thing" is any measure of publicity—and it certainly is—science-fiction got another push in the right direction. Shortly to be released is the new movie "The Thing", which is straight science-fiction. Unlike "Destination Moon", "The Thing" is laced with living people, not sheer mechanisms. Those who remember John Campbell's "Who Goes There?" from which the film is adapted, will not recognize any great similarity, but the basic scientific ideas are handled.

ESSENTIALLY, the story concerns an isolated party of explorers who stumble on the carcass of a supposedly long dead "thing"—actually a creature of super science from another world who is temporarily in suspended animation. The experiences resulting with such an alien subject naturally make for interesting entertainment.

FROM WHAT comes out of the rumor factories, this is but the first of a whole chain of stf films. Hollywood, aware of the tremendous public interest in science-fiction, is acting upon it and planning to release numerous first rate films. The film labs are already at work designing sets for the Moon, Mars, interstellar space—and anywhere else.

OUTSIDE OF Grimm's and Anderson's fairy tales, probably no piece of pure fantasy is so widely known all over the world as Lewis Carroll's immortal "Alice in Wonderland". And probably no fantasy is as good as this one from the standpoint of writing, interest and overwhelming charm. This was written for children, but it has threaded through it some surprising concepts—concepts which not a few scientifically inclined men have found to their liking. Sir Arthur Eddington, for example, was very fond of using quotes from "Alice in Wonderland" to illustrate a neat point he was trying to make.

In fact, "Alice" in some respects in her topsy-turvy world where ordinary reasoning doesn't hold, is remarkably like the modern physicist who has had to change a lot of

the ideas he once held.

IN ANY event, lovers of the fantasy will have a chance to see "Alice" in the movies, for Walt Disney has tried his hand at putting this classic through its paces. Realizing that he had best not tamper too much with the original idea, he has pretty well preserved the essential Alice and the characters with her, like the Mad Hatter, the Mock Turtle, and various of the others. He has tried to keep fairly accurate reproductions of the characters which illustrated the original book. Carroll personally supervised the artistic work of John Tenniel who illustrated the book. Disney has retained their flavor.

WE HAVE seen releases of this fantasy and find it completely enchanting and captivating. Disney has followed the story as nearly as an animated cartoon can do so, and has managed to catch the essential idea. Nevertheless, anyone who desires to savor the real "Alice in Wonderland", must read the book, for it is Carroll's inimitable style that is largely responsible for its charm.

The never-never land of this delightful story has inspired many stf writers to use it as a sort of background or theme idea. The stf reader who wants to enrich his fund of appreciation of quality would do well to familiarize himself with this immortal work. "Alice in Wonderland" will be read with amusement and enjoyment—even on Mars—twenty centuries from now!

NEXT MONTH, we're going to give you the kind of novel you've been asking for: A true fantasy with a strong thread of science-fiction running through it. Briefly, it concerns the return of Merlin, the boy who used to hang around King Arthur and his Knights, to America today for a weird and unholy purpose. It was written by the only writer who could do real justice to this kind of yarn—your favorite and ours—Theodore Sturgeon. Don't miss "Excalibur and the Atom"!.....LES

THE GOOD OLD DAYS . .

By
E. BRUCE YACHES

AS MONSTROUS as are many of our present-day war crimes, we almost have a peer in the atrocities committed in ancient times. In all periods of history and in all countries—no matter whether it has been a barbarous tribe attacking a civilized nation, whether two peoples were engaged in a civil war, or whatever the conflict—the loser has been sadly decimated.

The Mongols were the cause of the low state of civilization in the Near East. They practically drowned the land between Syria and Mesopotamia in blood and fire, so that even today it remains an unequalled example of annihilation.

The citizens of 143 cities were massacred by the wild General Hulagu. Timur, in Ispahan, slew 70,000 men in a single

day. Because he encountered resistance, he became furious and ordered the inhabitants to be buried alive. Then his army pitched camp on the graves of its still-breathing victims.

He built pyramids of victory on top of the ruined cities of Mesopotamia, each pyramid consisting of ten thousand humans. While they were still alive, he had them thrown into chalk pits where they would petrify.

In his campaign against India, his orders were even more monstrous: Each warrior had to produce a severed head. If they failed, they would lose their own heads. Each one of his men carried out his orders—and he had 800,000 men in his army! Who says "Give us back the good old days"?

SALUTE TO LUNA!

By **JOHN WESTON**

"IF YOU are still on exact course, you are catching this six centimeter, Cleary...we presume you are, and shall continue to radiate to you as arranged... keep—"

With a savage twist of his wrist, Cleary flicked the switch that shut off the hyper-sensitive receiver. "Damn!" he muttered. If I could only tell them, if I could only reply, he thought. He could see the officials huddled around the Base One transmitter at White Sands already talking pompously of the first successful rocket flight to the Moon. General Weatherman would be saying in that clipped affected speech of his, "Good boy, that Cleary!"

Yes, he was good all right, good and dead. As of now he was thoroughly and utterly dead and no hand could stay his fate. He, James Cleary, was gone from Earth and gone from life—that he knew. Now it was inexorable—there was no returning. He hunched closer against the acceleration couch as if that would warm the chill of impending death. He touched his hand to his face. He was sweating.

The slim torpedo that encased him slid smoothly toward its rendezvous with Luna. No rockets throbbed. But that was right. They shouldn't—*now*. He was coasting as expected toward the Lunar surface. Soon it would be time to switch on the rockets for his deceleration and landing. Only there wasn't going to be any deceleration and landing!

Cleary grinned ironically at the impossibility of the situation. He looked through the port at his side, the quartz circle that separated him from immediate death and gazed at the rapidly vanishing amorphous

cloud that represented his fuel supply. How often do meteors strike? How rare is a collision? How remote is the chance of a rocket having its fuel tanks punctured by a meteor?

And that was it. He thought of the slight tremor of the vessel only twenty minutes ago. He thought of his shocked dismay when he glanced out the port and saw his fuels streaming out the gaping hole. The meteor had not passed through him or his cabin. It would have been better that way. He would have died without the complicated introspection that he must now undergo.

Cleary opened his mouth and screamed, fearful agonized screams that drowned the cabin in horrifying sounds. Then he stopped. His sanity returned. You must die like a man, he told himself, disbelieving his words. Like a rat in a trap is more like it, he said to himself.

That was the horror. There was nothing he could do. With no fuel he must go on and on with ever-increasing velocity as the Lunar gravitational acceleration seized him. The rocket would move and move building up its velocity until it would strike somewhere on that craggy surface. And when it struck there would not even be the momentary funeral pyre that rocket fuel would have provided. Instead there'd be a puff of pumice dust, his body and the rocket would jam together into an indescribable mass of mixed metal and torn flesh.

Cleary reached for the only weapon he possessed: a razor-edged wire cutter, and brought it up to his throat. With hesitant hand he laid it down. "No," he said aloud, in the stillness of the rocket, "Cleary will go like a man..."

WHOM THE GODS WOULD



With a hissing, crackling noise, the flame from Hangra's cane formed a cage about Lars



SLAY

By Ivar Jorgensen

The ordinary woman gives birth to human offspring. But the princess Lall had ants on her planets! . . .

Book 1

Rulf of The Golden Horn

KNUTE SWENGORSEN had walked many miles inward from the *norsevillage* by the *fjord*. It had been a long, hard climb up the rocked and timbered mountainside. But Knute had moved swiftly, eager to scan the obscene face of Hangra, the witch who had long since been driven into the uplands by the decent folk who lived beside the sea.

Now, weariness was upon him, and he climbed with a curse for each

sharp rock, and a more potent curse for the hag who made herself so inaccessible to a man seeking the boon of her dark powers. Thus, a black mood rested upon him as he clambered up the last thorny slope and stood before the squat, teetering hovel of the far-famed witch.

There was no one there to greet him. He scowled and his voice rang across the lonesome crags: "Ho, foul mother! Show yourself before I smash to bits this rotten sty you live in!"

His answer was a somber cackle from off to the left. He whirled and looked among the rocks until he saw her, crouching atop a great boulder. It seemed a stupid place for even a witch to rest, and Knute called out, "Come down, you hag! Did one of your phantom beasts drive you aloft?"

Hangra had eyes of breathtaking beauty. But these eyes were surrounded by a ghastly ruin of scrawny, wrinkled flesh. She was little more than a sack of sparse bones draped over with a shapeless, evil smelling gown. Hair, greasy and matted, obstructed her vision as she peered down at the blond Northman.

"I was studying the stars," she said.

The inanity of this cheered Knute Swengorsen. "Old fool! It is high noon and there are no stars. Have your brains finally rotted beyond all use?"

There was no hostility in Hangra's reply. "The stars do not vanish in sunlight from those whose eyes are sharp. One steeped in the lore may read them night or day."

Knute threw back his head and roared with laughter. "And what say the stars, old crone?"

"They speak of evil—of dark and dreadful things; of a voyage across the void from star to star; of an evil ten thousand years in the making; a devil's nightmare now about to bloom."

"You talk in silly riddles. Voyages from star to star. If such rot were really true, it could still bring no harm to us."

Only now did Hangra flare in anger. "The earth also is a star, you thick-skulled ass! This horror I see concerns us very much."

"Call me not an ass, foul mother," Knute growled, "or I'll pluck you from that rock and twist your throat. Get down here now and serve me. I came to get a potion."

HANGRA'S EYES remained upon the blue heavens and her thoughts were far away. Then she closed her eyes and sat as one possessed by a vision. "As strange a ship as I have ever seen," she whispered. "A ship not built to sail on sea or land. Fire pours from its bowels, and it rides a flaming tail across the skies."

She ceased speaking. Her ancient frame trembled from the tension of her trance. She moaned; then spoke again in a curious sing-song voice that chilled the Norseman standing down below.

"I cannot see the substance. If wavers, thick as mist, before my eyes. But all the evil essence I can sense. It rides within that ship. It comes this way across the void." Hangra trembled even more violently and clenched her bony hands as if in anguish. "But I cannot tell if it be man or god!"

There was a time of utter silence. Gripped with a feeling akin to terror, Knute stood dumbly watching the trembling hag. The breeze had ceased to blow. The trees hung motionless. Not a birdling twittered in the air.

Then again, the croaking of Hangra's tortured voice: "Not man. No man has ever learned to ride the void. And if not man—then a god." She stood suddenly erect and pushed her scarecrow arms above her head. "A

god! To loose a horror on the earth. All men will die!"

A shriek, as of great pain, was ripped from Hangra's dried and twisted lips. Then she fell to the surface of the great boulder and lay as though dead.

Knute Swengorsen glanced uneasily about him and drew a short-sword half from the scabbard at his belt. He knew a fear, and sought to allay it by striking at some foe. But there was no foe; no one at which to strike. He looked again at the still, black form on the boulder. "Wake up, witch Hangra," he growled. "Awake and brew my potion. I'd be away from here."

And Hangra did awaken upon the sound of his voice. She sat up, looked around her as if in wonder, then came down from the boulder with such ease of motion and so swiftly, that she did not appear to move. She stood before Knute, leaning heavily upon her cane. Her face was drawn and white.

But with the passing of a moment, she was herself again. And around Knute Swengorsen, the forest whispered, the breeze played with the grasses, and the birds resumed their chirpings. Knute shook his head as though to clear away the vapors of a brain-mist. He towered threateningly over the withered crone.

"I thought I saw you standing on yon boulder. I'd have sworn I heard you mouthing weird insanities. Yet you stand here. Was that some spell you cast, old witch?"

SHE WALKED around him, utterly without fear, stood in the doorway of her hut and regarded him through eyes of great beauty; eyes like green jewels moulded into an obscene setting by some devil's craftsman. She leered at his bewilderment and said, "What would you have,

Knute Swengorsen?"

"Are you deaf? Four times I told my want. A potion such as only you can make."

"There are many potions—for many purposes."

Knute Swengorsen dropped his eyes like a sullen child. "Mine must be strong and swift. One day now—maybe tomorrow—Rolf comes again to the fjord. Even now his galley may be sighted."

"Rolf of the Golden Horn?"

"What other Rolf could I be speaking of?"

"I heard he died in some far land to the south."

"Not true. I'd heard that also. But word came overland."

"How could word come overland from such a far place?"

"It was brought by a band of strange men. They wore gowns, like women, but of coarse and heavy stuff. Fools in women's clothing who tried to make us kneel on the ground and pray."

"I've never seen such men."

Knute sneered at her. "They would have no intercourse with witches. They carried crosses on their staves and told us of a God who died upon a cross."

"What God was this?"

Knute Swengorsen waved an impatient hand. "It doesn't matter. We killed the men before they could tell us much. The news about Rolf they told before."

"What news?"

"Rolf left with Rollo, full a year ago. They went to slay and pillage in the southern lands."

"That I knew."

"According to these women-men, both Rolf and Rollo traveled far—into a land called Gaul, I think they said. They burned and killed."

The old hag grinned. "And filled their galleys up with priceless loot

"I'll wager."

"But Rollo drank of alien wines that turned his blood to water. They traveled until they came to a city walled in stone. There Rollo took a dark-eyed wife and swore he'd never ride the sea again."

"Rollo? Not to return?"

"Not to return. But Rolf refused the bait. He spat upon Rollo and turned the prow of his galley north." Knute waxed even more sullen. He sank to the ground and sat poking the earth between his thick legs. "So now I want a potion, witch."

HANGRA threw back her head and cackled. "I think I see the plot. With Rolf's returning, your chance of fair Freya's hand grows remote indeed. You know full well she'll never bed with you."

"Silence hag! One word more and I'll slice your skinny neck."

Hangra ignored this. "Does the Golden Horn also await Rolf's return?"

"It hangs upon the wall," Knute growled. "Within the Common House."

"And none but Rolf has ever drunk it dry?"

"None."

"What potion would you have me brew?" she asked.

"A simple one for your foul alchemistries. Something to put into the Golden Horn so that when Rolf drinks, it will knock him to the earth. One draught of ale and he falls—"

"And dies?"

"Not death, you fool. It's ridicule I want. Something to destroy the myth of his manhood. With the *norse-volk* laughing at him, I'll take my chance that Freya's love will cool."

Hangra's eyes flashed with scorn. "The day you get sweet Freya into bed, my wolves will mate with

doves!"

Knute sprang to his feet and raised a fist over Hangra's head. But the witch stood her ground and laughed with fresh contempt. "I'll not make your potion," she said, and turned away.

But then she stiffened and turned slowly backward, facing Knute. But she did not appear to see him. Rather, her eyes stared through his great bulk and seemed to be reading something written on the hills beyond. She held up a bony finger and spoke—but not to Knute Swengorsen. Rather to the trees and hills and the high blue sky above.

"A potion in the Golden Horn. Why not?"

Knute grinned. "I knew your senses would appreciate the joke."

"You'll swear it is for his lips and his alone?"

"Fool crone! What man would dare use Rolf's great drinking horn?"

"True words." But Hangra still was deep in thought.

"Well, witch. Do I get my potion? I have gold to pay."

"I'll brew the draught."

"And it will do the deed?"

Hangra cackled and rubbed her hideous hands together. "Beyond your boldest dreams. Now sit you down and rest while I prepare the pot."

Knute Swengorsen lowered himself to the surface of a rock and watched Hangra disappear through the dark doorway of her hovel. He lounged in comfort, foreseeing in his mind the sweetness that would be his with Rolf thoroughly discredited. Certain he was that Hangra's potion in Rolf's ale would do the trick. How could Freya do otherwise than forswear a man turned into a laughing stock? He'd have her in his arms before the new moon rose.

His attention was caught by the sound of movement within Hangra's

hut. Then came an odor, stinking, as from a musty cellar of rotten frogs. And Hangra's voice like bone scraped on bone as she chanted some dread spell.

BUT THERE was more to come.

Night fell with the seeming swift-ness of a blanket drawn across the sky and Knute stared in terror—helpless to move—as a ghastly, blood red glow emanated from the doorway of the hovel. And Knute Swengorsen knew the witch was not alone. There was the sound of muted voices—then a moan of devils, snarling as though loathe to obey some command of the powerful witch within. The red glow dimmed and brightened, to throw a huge shadow of Hangra's twisted form as she moved back and forth about her strange business.

Then it was done with. The blood glow faded and the crone came forth bearing a small vial. "Put this into the drinking horn," she said. "The quantity is minute. But the eighth part of a tiny drop. It will not be seen."

His courage returning, Knute snatched the vial from her thin fingers and thrust it into his belt. Also from his belt, he took forth a bag that jingled pleasantly and held it out.

"Your money, witch. Take it. I would hasten home. This crawling place plays tricks upon my eyes."

Hangra stepped backward. "Be-gone. And take your gold with you. Evil though you are, you've done the world a service coming here. Back to your village, and take care lest the wolves feed on your flesh."

Knute laughed. "I have no fear of mountain wolves, old crone."

Hangra watched him stride down the rocky slope. Then she looked upward, into the dark sky, and muttered, "No fear of mountain wolves.

But what of those that hover in the void?"

After Knute Swengorsen faded from sight, Hangra went back to the high boulder where she sat for a long time watching a great red star low on the horizon.

Soon a chill wind came up and moaned through the trees. With it, the cold moon. Then a shadow flitted softly over the boulder and a white-fanged wolf was there to crouch at Hangra's feet. Without thought, her hand went out to stroke its head.

The wolf licked the hand, straightened and stood staring in the direction Knute had gone. The gray beast whined and wagged its haunches. The wagging was a plea.

But Hangra slapped the wolf across the nose, and spoke sharply: "Curb your appetite, my friend. That, or hunt elsewhere in the woods this night. He is not to be touched. You hear my words? Not to be touched."

The wolf snarled and slunk away. Hangra called after it: "His meat is far too precious for your gullet. He carries the fate of the world within his belt."

She turned to continue gazing, in dreadful fascination, at the low red star.

ROLF OF the Golden Horn was heading home. The winds and the forty oars were driving the prow of his loot-laden galley ever northward; out of the wide mouth of the Gallic river; swift past the isles of Engle-Land; hard into the waters of the cold Northern Sea and up under the shadows of the great lights that flamed down from the top of the world.

Rolf was going home.

In his heart was a strange mixture of sorrow and happy anticipation. Sorrow at the weakness of Rollo, beside whom he had sailed—to sack,

burn, and pillage, even to the gates of Alexandria in the warm southern seas. Together—their galleys breasting the waves side by side—they had prowled far down to the warm and perfumed lands, to sink their swords deep into the rotting corpse of decadent Rome. Side by side, they had gloried in being Vikings! Laughed deep in their throats at the prayer that went up all over Europe to the Man of Galilee and his Father which was in heaven: "From the fury of the Vikings, O Lord, protect us."

Laughed at the gentle prophets; pillaged and burned as they put their faith in the thunder gods and the great-breasted lightning goddesses of the northlands. Spat their contempt on all things weak.

Then, for Rolf, the shock.

Rollo—one day in Gaul, as they cut their way through the defenders of a gray-stone town—raising his sword above a kneeling figure; lifting his great blade high to slash in twain the frail body of a youth.

Then Rollo saw. Not a youth. A dark eyed girl, with breasts scarcely swelling the surface of the white tunic she wore. She knelt before him and in her hands was a small gold cross. Her body was erect from knee to head—straight as a northern pine she knelt. Her face was calm and there was no fear in her eyes.

Still marveling now, Rolf remembered what he saw. Rollo's blade pulled short in mid-air. Then lowered to his side. Rollo's hand reaching down to lift the maid up by her rich, dark hair.

Rollo's voice: "Do you think that bit of gold will save you, maid?"

"I think it will," she answered, steadily. "But kill me if you will—it matters not. Strike. With my final breath I'll pray for you."

AND ROLLO—with a weariness in his voice Rolf had never before detected: "Be silent, maid. I'm not in need of prayers." But the words and the tone did not match as Rollo released his grip on the girl's hair and touched her gold cross with his finger tip. "There is no strength in this bauble."

"The strength of Him who died upon a cross."

Rollo had turned to Rolf, sheathing his sword the while. "I tire of this. I'll go and rest myself." Then to the girl: "Come, maid, and tell me of this fool you worship. This God who allowed himself to be crucified."

Rollo had been strange from that day on. Keeping to himself and showing no interest in the sharing of the loot. One day, he came to Rolf's tent walking side by side with the girl, her hand in his. "My weariness still persists. I'm tired unto death of pillage, fire, and screams of agony. Even now I fear the worst—that blood will flow in rivers through my dreams."

"Then we'll go home," Rolf told his sailing mate. "I too am lonesome for the high, white peaks. We'll turn our galleys north."

"You must return without me. I'll take me here a wife and here I'll stay. Farewell to you, Rolf. And may your own wild gods have pity and blot your crimes from out your memory."

"My gods are your gods, too."

"Not so. Mine died in Galilee." And Rolf saw the cross suspended around Rollo's neck.

Rollo extended his hand, but Rolf turned away in bitterness. Next day he sailed.

And now, facing again the peaks of his homeland, his heart was troubled with uncertainty as he marveled at the power of the dark-eyed maid who'd bent the fierce Rollo in her hands like

a slender twig.

But uppermost were his thoughts of Freya, the golden-haired Norsemaiden he'd left standing on the shore a full year back. Filled as he was with contempt for the slender dark-eyed women of the south, Freya's image gleamed in his memory, quickening his heart and the breath within his throat. Rollo could turn into a milk-white thing if he chose; could take a spindling maiden as his bride.

Rolf smiled. A woman awaited him! A tall and golden maiden built for ecstasy. Broad of bosom, strong of limb. Born and bred to withstand the first, full, glorious shock of mating.

His kind of woman!

Rolf's thoughts were broken now by a shout from the bow of the galley. The thundering voice of Lars, his second in command and his good friend: "Rolf—out ahead! We've raised the points beyond the *fjord*. We're home!"

ROLF HURRIED up the runway upon each side of which twenty slaves bent their broad backs to the oars. They were a mixture, these slaves. Picked for their girth and sinew from a dozen conquered ports, their skins were black and yellow and white. Some wore great shocks of hair. Some, but a thin black pig-tail down their backs. And others bald as gourds. Each was as strong as several ordinary men but none could break the chains that held each to his place. Their backs were broad. But still they feared the whip that lashed them on.

Rolf passed the slaves and went into the prow of the dragon-galley to stand beside Lars and peer across the green waters. "By Tor, you're right! I see the *norsevolk* gathered there!"

And this was true. The galley had been long since sighted. The *norsevolk* lined the shore. Lars, his great red face aglow, waved an arm, then laid it

over Rolf's shoulders and said, "I envy you, my friend—for the prize that waits you there."

Rolf's smile was small and tight as, suddenly, a bleak, depressing mood came over him. "She's probably forgotten me," he muttered. "Wed now, no doubt, and waiting with an infant in her arms."

Lars' laughter rang against the hills and back. "Not Freya! That lass will bed with you or die a virgin. How many have tried to turn her heart away from you and failed?"

The *fjord* was now abeam. Rolf said, "You'd best take the rudder, Lars. Bring her on the beach and then set the slaves to unloading."

This disappointed Lars. "I'll run her in, but let the others take care of the rest. I vow I'll see you drain the Golden Horn."

Rolf's smile deepened. "So be it. You and I shall seek the Common House."

The galley was beached skillfully, while the whole *norsevillage* gave shouts of welcome. Rolf's Viking crew tumbled ashore, many to seize yellow-haired wives—to sweep them up and carry them back to the village, each with a line of children strung out behind like a joyful tail. Lovers clung in passionate embrace, and there was not a Viking who did not find a pair of waiting arms.

None except Rolf.

FOR FREYA did not shout welcome with the rest. She stood apart, and as Rolf approached her she smiled but made no move. Nor did Rolf consummate his year-old dreams by seizing her. A peculiar silence gripped him, a shyness he had never known before. He merely held his cupped hands forth and said, "I brought you these."

Her eyes were for him and not the savagely gotten loot. "They matter

not," she said softly. "You brought yourself unwounded and alive; that is enough."

But the hands of Freya's mother, gnarled and worn, reached out. Her old voice remonstrated with her daughter: "Be not so ungrateful! Jewels, rings and pendants from far lands. The ransom of a king and you spurn it. Are you mad?"

Rolf's eyes were still on Freya's face. They remained there as he opened his hands and spilled the baubles into those of the Norsemother. Some missed the open palms and the old woman was on her knees scrambling feverishly in the dirt.

But Rolf and Freya saw none of this. Rolf said, "You waited?"

"Had you ever cause to doubt?"

He dropped his eyes like a bashful stripling. "I was so far away. You are warm and young and beautiful. Your loins must have cried out for mating. And you had no way of knowing I'd return."

"I'd mate with no one else. That you should know."

Rolf was now afire to take her to himself and have her. The passion choked in his throat and strangled his words. "Then even today? This night?"

Freya's eyes clouded. "So you may take the sea again at dawn?"

Rolf moved closer and she held her ground until her breasts were hard against his plate. And in his dizziness Rolf heard a voice. The voice was his, but not the words. The words were those of Rollo, spoken back in Gaul, but they came from Rolf's lips as though entirely undirected by his brain.

"I tire of war. I'm through with pillage, fire and screams of death. Even now I fear the worst—that blood will flow in rivers through my dreams."

Her eyes lighted and now her lips came close. "Fear not, about your

dreams, my love. From this day on I'll take full charge of them. Your time of steel is through. My heart will be your buffer in the night."

"This night?"

"We'll say the vows and spread the marriage feast. Tonight I will be yours."

Rolf let out a mighty shout. "Lars! Jorgen! Nels! Give gifts to all! Gems, gold and silks! And pass the word to lay the wedding feast!"

LARS, EACH arm filled with a yellow-haired maiden, gave also a lusty roar. Arising from where he sat, he dumped both maidens to the ground and said, "By Tor! I've waited a long time for this! Unload the ship. Give wealth and loot to all! Rolf of the Golden Horn will soon be wed."

Immediately, the Viking crew approached from all sides. They laid hands on Rolf and carried him away to his dwelling place. As was the custom, the maidens did likewise with Freya; vanishing with her into the village, to the accompaniment of much laughter.

At Rolf's dwelling place, the Vikings crowded around and horns were raised, filled full with foaming ale. A horn was pushed toward Rolf and it was Knute Swengorsen who remembered.

"Hold there, fool! Is all custom to be forgotten? Rolf should go first to the Common House. The Golden Horn stands waiting to be drained."

This indeed was the custom. A chieftain's worth was measured greatly by his ability to consume the strong ale of the *norsevolk*. And in all the *norseland*, there was no horn so huge and heavy as that of Rolf's. Twice Rolf had stood at the board in the Common House, held the Golden Horn aloft, and emptied it with a single, superhuman draught. This

while other Vikings stood by in silent envy. For this feat, more than for any other, they granted him his role as leader. But he could not rest on laurels won before. Fresh off the sea, custom demanded that he repeat the act and thus prove anew his strength.

Rolf eyed Knute Swengorsen and his smiling ceased. He had no liking for this man. A coward, Knute, as evidenced by his land-locked feet. Never had he ridden a galley south in search of loot and glory. He preferred to remain behind and plead suit to lonesome maidens. Weak and cowardly, he had the friendship of no man. To frustrate Knute Swengorsen more than for any other reason, Rolf said, "I'll drink at the wedding feast—and not before."

This did not suit Knute Swengorsen. "Could it be you doubt your strength? It would seem you wish to get the maid Freya safely bound to you before you risk your prestige."

Rolf scowled and stepped forward. Drawing his sword, he slapped it flat across his tormentor's rump. "But for the fact that I refuse to kill upon my wedding day, I'd spill your rotten blood. Away, landcrab! And leave this place to men."

Lars dropped his horn and snatched out his own blade. "I'm not being wed today," he cried, "so I claim the joy of slaughtering this cow. I'll tie my hands and lie upon my back and fight him with a sword between my toes."

Rolf, his good spirits revived, stepped forward, laughing. "We'll have no blood to mar this wedding stag."

"I'll tie my legs and fight him with my teeth. He can use two swords."

Rolf roared, "Enough. I claim a drink from all."

THE VIKINGS raised their horns.

Lars scowled, then grinned and sheathed his sword as Knute Swen-

gorsen went quickly out the door. A horn was pushed toward Rolf. He drained it and a cheer went up.

Then Lars called, "Silence! I have a tale. A story you'll all like—of love in Gaul. The night we razed their shores, I found two maidens on the rocks—sisters, I vow, who were bathing in the surf. Such terror in four eyes I never saw. Such abject haste to grant my every wish."

A dozen Vikings laughed and one man said, "The details, Lars. You left a sadder pair?"

"Sadder! But no! I'll tell you more of it."

He settled to his tale. The stag was on.

The hours passed swiftly until, at sunset, Rolf told his vows to Freya by the tree where all the *norsevolk* marriages were made; told them, not knowing of the bitter days ahead. Freya vowed also. Then a maiden bent to shred up Freya's gown—to tear it fore and aft from hem to waist. This symbolized the giving of the bride and they were wed.

Next was the Common House; laughter and ale and food under the yellow light from the great fish oil lamps. Shouting, the Vikings—men who sailed the seas, as differentiated from the *norsevolk* who stayed at home—seated Rolf and Freya on a throne at the end of the groaning table. Shouting, they brought forth the Golden Horn and filled it to the brim with ale. This horn was twice the size of all the rest. Encrusted with jewels and brimming with the brew, it made a weight to break a camel's back.

They handed it to Rolf. The Viking Chief stood tall and lifted the horn on high. All eyes were on him now, and silence settled over the Common House. Twice prior, they had seen him do this thing. But still the thought was in their minds: No

man can empty it!

Lars, as though sensing the trend of their minds, got to his feet and cried, "No man but Rolf!"

Rolf took a breath that added a full five inches to the girth of his barrel chest. He put the horn against his lips and drank. The level of the ale went down the horn and, as it sank, each Viking came slowly from his seat as though drawn erect by the falling of the brew. Down—down it went, and higher, even higher, was the tilt of the great cup in Rolf's hands.

Then, with victory seeming sure, Rolf faltered. He swayed. His blue eyes glazed. His grip faltered on the horn. The vessel tilted backward, crashed down with a ringing sound and rolled across the floor.

ALL THE Vikings stood frozen in surprise—all save Lars. His chair fell over as he rushed to Rolf's side past Freya's reaching arms. But Rolf stiffened and scowled and motioned Lars away. But only to reel and grope; to fall forward like a wind-blown tree and lie as though dead.

Freya knelt down beside him. The Vikings crowded forward. And, shouldered out by the sea-roving giants, the *norsevolk* clustered in the back-ground and spoke among themselves.

They had doubted his ability to empty out the horn. And yet their surprise and consternation was just as great that he had failed. One by one, two by two, and in groups, they went silently out of the Common House as though they felt themselves the humiliation Rolf would know when he awakened.

Now only Freya, Lars, and a dozen Vikings remained. To the Vikings, Freya raised accusing eyes. She said, "You yourselves betrayed him! You let him drink too much at your stupid stag! How could he dry the

Golden Horn with forty horns of ale already drunk." She cradled Rolf's great head in her lap and wept.

One of the Vikings answered her: "He drank but little at the stag. The warmth of southern climates must have softened him."

Lars raised his head and snorted like a bull. "The man who said that better be prepared to fight!" he roared.

The incautious Viking dropped his eyes in confusion as Lars' hand went toward his blade. But Freya frowned. "Have done with words. All this bravado gets us nothing. Help me lift him to his bed."

As the Vikings lifted Rolf and carried him to his dwelling, Lars walked behind with Freya, muttering the while. "There's something rotten here. Rolf could swill ale 'til dawn and walk away. He could laugh with every Viking stiff beneath the board. But to keel over like a stripling in the sun! This smacks of Hangra's work!"

"But she was driven upland long ago," Freya protested.

"Still—many know the pathway to her door."

The Vikings laid Rolf upon his bridal bed. Then, lowering their eyes, they went away. Freya sat long and silently beside her snoring husband. Lars left, to return at a later hour. His face was grim and he was wiping dark blood from his sword.

"He still sleeps?"

"Far deeper than before. It seems that he has just begun to sleep."

"And so does Knute Swengorsen. But for a far longer time, unless he has a means of rising from the dead."

"What made you seek Knute Swengorsen out?"

"Because he was the only enemy Rolf had in the village. Knute yearned to wed with you himself. That I've known for a long time. At the point

of my blade he told a tale to make a man sick. He got a potion from the witch Hangra and put it in the Golden Horn."

"You killed him. Now death has marred my wedding night."

"Say rather just execution of a cow not fit to live. You'd best lie down beside your husband and share his dream this night, so long as there is nothing else to share. I have a trip to make into the mountains."

"You waste your time. Hangra cannot be slain by mortal man. Her savage wolves would tear your vitals out."

Lars scowled. "Rest with your husband, maiden, and leave the work of men to men. I yearn to stain my sword with the blood of a witch."

BOILING with rage, Lars left the *norsevillage* and moved toward the uplands further from the sea. The way was sharp and hard, but a pale moon lit the hills and Lars' expanding anger drove him on.

Halfway to Hangra's hut, a shadow fell across Lars' path. The shadow materialized into a wolf, snarled, and slashed with razor fangs at Lars' thigh.

The Viking's sword cut a silver path through the moonlight; a low-slung arc, and the wolf screamed like a soul dipped in hell's hottest brimstone. It slavered in fear and skulked away on three legs, and upon the path in front of Lars lay a severed wolf's foot.

Lars bent and picked it up. The blood, fast running from the ankle, dripped to the ground and then all the blood was gone. But, strangely, under the soft fur gripped in Lars' hand, there was a strong, even pulse beat as though the thing still lived. Lars thrust the paw into his belt and strode on up the mountain.

More shadows came—to turn into

gray bodies, hate-filled eyes, great mouth-caverns, filled with fangs. Lars' sword slashed out again and again, but the wolves were careful now. They slipped like water away from his blade, but ever to whirl and come at him again.

Finally, in a great spasm of frustrated rage, Lars dropped his sword and seized the closest beast in his doubled fists. The creature had leaped at his throat and he caught it full in the air, its jaws agape. His hands wrapped true around the jaws, both top and bottom. Then, his legs set wide apart, he tore the beast asunder with one great retching of his muscled chest, until it hung lifeless, split from snout to belly.

"Take that and dine on it, you fiends," Lars yelled, and hurled the carcass at the circling wolves. They fell upon it like the wolves they were, and Lars climbed on. But, strangely, in his belt, the wolf paw continued with its steady, even beat.

Lars found Hangra on the boulder where she seemed to spend much time these days. He drew his sword and hailed her in a ringing voice. "I'm going to kill you, witch! The potion for the Golden Horn was no doubt Knute's idea. But you must share the guilt with him and die. Even now great Rolf lies in a stupor from your handiwork."

SHE watched him from the rock above, her green eyes smouldering with an abstract fire. "The potion Knute desired and the one he got were entirely different," she replied. "Nor should you blame poor Knute Swengorsen too much. He was but what he was, a weak mortal shell. And his visit to my hut was in reality long foreordained."

"You speak in silly riddles. You try to fend off my wrath with words. Come down and meet your fate."

Hangra came to her feet and her green eyes burned. "Silly Viking!"

"I tore your wolves asunder with my bare hands. I sent them slinking into the brush. And now I'll slay their evil mistress."

Her smile was a twisted leer as she replied, "You had no cause to kill my pets. They were a committee of welcome. They sought to lick your face in friendship."

Lars sprang toward the rock, his sword upraised. Hangra croaked, "You cannot slay me, fool! Perhaps you have no fear of my poor powers. Would this reshape your views?"

She waved her cane. A stream of blue fire welled from its tip to lance out and knock Lars' sword from his grip. This done, the flame formed into a hissing, crackling spiral that wrapped around him, forming a cage.

"Stand where you are, Viking! Move not an inch. To touch that fire with so much as a fingertip will spell your death."

Lars stared in wonder at the quivering flame, then heard Hangra's words continuing: "I have no wish to see you stiff in death. And as to Rolf, have you no fear. He sleeps in order that he may fulfill a destiny in which you'll share. Rolf has become a chosen one of forces far beyond your ken or mine. He will awaken soon, so return to your village, for you carry with you a talisman you both will need. A magic tool to guide you on the way you both must go."

Lars' rage had faded and great wonder took its place. He pulled, frowning, at his beard. "There's something here too deep for me." He studied Hangra, then hastened to add: "Think not for a moment that I fear this blue-fire cage. Were I still so inclined, I'd walk right through it and cut your heart from its place in your skinny chest."

Hangra grinned ever so slightly. "That I know full well, brave Viking, and I consider myself fortunate that I have talked you out of such a deed."

Lars pondered. "Yes, your words, while I don't understand them, seem ponderous and full of wisdom. You promise that no harm will come to Rolf?"

"I promise nothing of the sort. It is not within my power. Both he and you may die. We all may die. Return to your village now. You'll find he's learned much that you should know."

As though having forgotten the fire, Lars stooped to pick up his sword. Hangra's hand moved slightly, and the fire bent away from him in all directions; then it faded into nothingness.

Lars, deep in thought, sheathed his weapon and turned down the hill. He walked slowly and came to a halt as Hangra's voice pursued him: "Guard well the wolf paw in your belt. You'll find that Rolf knows what to do with it."

Lars continued on and anyone within earshot could have heard him muttering, "It's not that I was afraid. It's just that discretion is a part of valor that should not be overlooked. When one fights demons, one only does the best one can. One strives to stay alive."

He increased the speed of his lagging feet now, and was suddenly conscious of the wolf's paw pulsing evenly in his belt.

IT WAS well into the night when he reached the *norsevillage* and went straight to Rolf's dwelling place. All was quiet as he pushed his way into the bed chamber where Rolf lay. As before, Freya sat by the bedside, waiting patiently for her husband to awaken. Rolf's huge form lay quiet on the bed.

But, as though Lars' entrance were a signal, Rolf stirred, and Freya

leaned quickly forward. "His eyes are opening," she whispered. "He is awakening."

This was true. As Lars and Freya watched, Rolf sat up and looked around the chamber. There were signs of great bewilderment in his expression. He passed a hand across his forehead and asked, "How came I back so quickly?"

"Back from what place, my love?" Freya inquired of him. "You have not been away. Not since you returned in your galley from the south."

Rolf continued to gaze around him. "That was long before. Since then I traveled to a strange place—high in mountains so tall they dwarfed the peaks we know here in the Northland."

Freya pressed an anxious question: "Do you not recall our wedding, Rolf? The feast in the Common House and your drinking from the Golden Horn?"

"Aye, that I remember well, but it was very long ago. Much has happened since."

"It was only yesterday," Lars said. "Regardless of how things appear to you, the facts are these, and mark them well because they are true. You fell into a faint while drinking from the Golden Horn and we brought you to your bed. For hours, you've lain in a stupor and are just awaking now."

Rolf stared full into Lars' face and the latter stood frozen. It was as if Lars had never seen this man before. Swiftly he scanned the giant Viking's face. The features, taken singly, seemed the same: the jutting hawk's nose; the high forehead; the great mane of golden hair. Yet in assembly, they seemed to mark a different man.

THEN LARS saw what had changed. The eyes. New fires burned within them now. The icy northern blue was gone, and in its

place were azure fires reminding Lars of those the witch Hangra had used to trap him in the uplands. And Lars was filled with awe at what he gazed upon and could not understand.

He came forward and placed a hand upon Rolf's knee. "It was a potion in your drink that laid you low—put there by Knute Swengorsen and brewed by Hangra in the hills. Knute Swengorsen I killed, and hastened up the mountains to do the same to Hangra."

Lars shifted his eyes and split his telling so that Freya was also included. "But I came upon strange things. There is more to this than Knute Swengorsen's jealousy. Hangra spoke of things foreordained, and in the telling, I got the feeling she is not so evil as we've always thought. Now tell us what occurred within your dream."

Rolf got up and stretched his mighty legs. "I must go forth and slay an evil god," he said.

Tears came to Freya's eyes. "Somehow I knew, there in the Common House, that wedded ecstasy was not for me. What god is this that you must slay, and why?"

"Come," said Rolf.

He led them from the dwelling place and stood in the open gazing at the sky. For a time he stared only at the moon; then gave this over and let his eyes wander across the star-filled heavens, stopping now and again to study some intricate pattern upon the inverted surface of the dark-blue bowl above. Then he raised his arm and pointed to a large red star close to the horizon.

"The god comes from there," he said. "I traveled far with Hangra in my dream. Just how it was done, I do not know, but I learned many things. She showed me somewhat of how things are made; knowledge I did not have before. She showed me that the stars are not just pin pricks in the

night where light comes through, but worlds like ours upon which people live."

Both Lars and Freya were silent. All this was beyond them and smacked of insanity. Yet such was Rolf's intensity, it did not occur to either of them to doubt.

"She showed me then a ship not built for land or sea; a giant tear drop fashioned in a forge and made to sail the void." He was still pointing at the baleful red star. "It came from there," he said, "straight toward our world. And in its hold, there rides this evil god who must be slain. If this god triumphs, earth will end its days, overrun with vermin eating out the life of every living thing."

"What does this god look like?" Lars asked. "And how will all this vermin come to be?"

ROLF FROWNED. "I cannot answer you—I do not know. There was a mist that covered everything. But I saw Hangra's eyes and heard our own gods speak in thunder from the skies. In Hangra's eyes and in the thunder, only this was clear: The evil god must die. I tell you even our gods are afraid, and Hangra trembles for the world."

Lars was staring also at the star. "Hangra told me something of this tonight and said I also fitted into the scheme. The details all are news to me, and I will test you now to see if this be truth or just some hoax to fill up Hangra's time."

"What test have you?"

"Tell me—what talisman do I carry that will be needed, and how will it be used?"

Rolf did not hesitate: "There is a place flanked with high mountains; the top of the world, it seemed. It is to this place we must go to find the god, and in your belt you have a wolf paw Hangra gave you."

"She gave it not! I took it from her

beast."

"She sent her beast. The wolf paw has a pulse beat in it and as we make our way across the sea and land, the paw will show the way."

Freya was weeping quietly. "How?" she asked. "By running on before?"

"No. But if our path be true, the pulse will beat. If not the pulse will fail. We have but to follow—it will lead the way."

"I still don't understand," Freya pursued. "Why was my husband chosen for this mission? And you say our gods are fearful in Valhalla. That cannot be true."

"Our gods are fearful for the world. They are powerless before this alien god."

"And Hangra's magic? That is powerless too?"

"The only power that can destroy this god is a strong right arm and several feet of steel."

Lars had taken the wolf paw from his belt. He handed it to Rolf. "There is your talisman." It lay in Rolf's palm and Freya reached forth and took it. Her eyes widened.

"A paw severed and still beating with the rhythm of a heart. There's much in this to cancel out all doubt. And vet..."

"When do we leave?" Lars asked.

"We've already waited far too long. The time is very short."

"Then I will rouse the men?"

"One man. Call Jorgen only. We must travel fast and light 'cross half a world."

FREYA MOVED close to him, her eyes again brimming with tears. "Is the rush so great that you must leave a virgin bride? Cannot the god-slayer become a husband first and his virgin bride a wife?"

Rolf took her in his arms, then pressed her back. "I will return," he said, "knowing you'll keep yourself for me."

She stood erect and there was misery in her eyes. "That you can always

know, for it is truth. But still scant comfort for the one you leave."

But he scarce heard her. He'd turned to Lars and the fever in his own eyes had increased. "The wind is fair and will remain so for a time to come. We raise the sail and ride the waters. That much I know. Bring Jorgen to me in my dwelling place."

Silently, Freya helped her husband dress; wound up the leather thongs that held his leggings on; fastened his belt and then—though it took all her strength—insisted that she lift the great horned helmet; and while he knelt, she put it on his head. Then she had one last word. Simply, she said, "Please do not go, my lord. My heart tells me you will not return; that I will await you, barren, knowing and wanting no other man, 'til I am old and toothless and alone."

Rolf's laughter boomed against the ceiling. "Have no such doubts, sweet wife. I will return when this great deed is done, and we will raise strong sons to sail the seas and bring us wealth in our old age. But go I must."

Freya lowered her head in submission. "Then I will say no more. One kiss, my husband."

They kissed, and as Rolf released his bride, the room seemed full of giants. Lars himself took up a lot of space, but the two with him, added to the bulk of mighty Rolf, seemed to bend the walls of the chamber.

"Here is Jorgen," Lars said. "He understands it not, nor did I bother to explain too much, but he is agreeable."

JORGEN was of the Viking cut. Broad, red-faced, yellow-haired. But in his eyes was a certain bovine look—a dullness as though not too great an intelligence roosted behind them. But none could question the loyalty he gave his Chief.

"My sword is ready," he said. That was all.

But Rolf's attention was held by

the fourth man in the room. A giant Nubian who stood with folded arms. Naked to the waist, he appeared to be built of shiny black mahogany. His muscles bulged and rippled beneath his ebony skin.

"This slave I know," Lars said. "I talked with him on the galley coming north. We took him during a raid in Gaul—hailed him off a slave platform where he lay chained."

"But I said bring only Jorgen," Rolf cut in.

"True, but this slave will be valuable. He speaks five languages. He has served many masters in many lands. His tongue would be of use to us."

Rolf considered, then nodded his head. "You are right, but no man goes on this journey as a slave." Turning to the Nubian, Rolf said, "What is your name, fellow?"

"Tazor is what I'm called." The Nubian's eyes were flat, expressionless.

"We go on a long and perilous journey, from which all of us may not return. Do you wish to go with us, sharing our hardships and our rewards—as a free man?"

"I was taken as a slave at four," Tazor replied. "My father was a slave and his, and his again. Freedom I never had so I do not know whether I'd have use for it or not. But I will go with you and do my best."

"Strike off his chains," Rolf said. "Give him a belt and weapons and a cloak."

The Nubian was supplied. Water and ale and food were put upon the ship. Rolf kissed his wife again as Tazor raised the sail. Then, with a mighty push, Rolf sent the galley off the sand—into the sea—to follow it and climb aboard.

The freshened pre-dawn winds filled the dragon-canvas and the galley

sheared to the south as Jorgen laid the rudder over hard. White water chopped across the prow.

Then, in the faint false dawn, the sharp eyes of the Viking Rolf beheld a figure on the rocky point beside the fjord; saw Freya's hair streaming in the breeze, her arm upraised. Heard her call out, "Farewell, god-slayer. May fortune favor you!"

"I will return," Rolf called. Then he turned his eyes forward and never again looked back.

DAY AFTER day came up at dawn to pass and sink into the western sea. Rolf paced the walk between the empty galley benches and grudging each passing hour. Lars, too, seemed impatient.

"The land crawls by," Rolf growled. "Would that we had a ship the like of which I saw within my dreams."

Lars shrugged. "Wishing is of no help. We can but bide our time and hope our talisman proves faithful."

Rolf took the severed wolf paw from his belt. "The pulse beats strong and true."

Lars scowled. "I'll have more faith in that claw when I find it can do otherwise."

The faith of the Viking was bolstered four days later when the land they skirted began to fade away toward the east; when Rolf brought forth the wolf paw and called, "Hold! The beat is fading out. It's almost gone!"

Lars ran forward and found that it was true. "According to this hairy pilot," Lars said, "we've gone off course. What are your orders now?"

"Cleave to land!" Rolf shouted. "Jorgen—over on the rudder! Tazor—bend the sail!"

Upon command, Jorgen brought the rudder hard over, the Nubian hurled his strength against the mast and

brought the square sail around until the ship heeled eastward. After a few minutes, Rolf nodded and handed the wolf paw to Lars. Again the beat was strong and even. Lars stared at the grisly trophy in his palm and said, "This thing fair makes my skin creep!"

Later, with the stolid Jorgen holding the rudder—as he would hold it, if necessary, until Kingdom Come—the other three were standing in the bow.

"Tell me, Nubian," Rolf said, "do you know anything of these lands we pass?"

Tazor's dark, expressionless eyes played back and forth along the shore. "This, I believe, is the far northern part of the Gallic lands. We travel to the east, but not the east of spices and of palms. They must be reached much further south as you well know. I have never been this way before, but I think that trouble lies ahead for our ship. I fear the waters end in ice on one side and the vast land from whence came the Mongols on the other."

"The wind holds fair as it has held for days," Rolf said. "According to our talisman, we must go on."

The Nubian looked silently at Lars and Rolf—then said, "You told me when we left the shore that I was free."

"That's true, you are."

"Then I may not be amiss in giving voice to curiosity. I have a natural wonder as to what land you seek—what place we go. Considering the route we take, my wonder increases."

"You have a right to know, my friend. We've kept you in the dark from carelessness, not plan."

IMMEDIATELY, between them, the two Vikings told the Nubian of all that had occurred. The part that

Hangra played—the mission she had given Rolf to kill a god in some far place.

Tazor looked flat eyed at the wolf paw, took it in his hand and felt its pulse. His expression did not change. "I long to speak my mind," he said, "but never having been so bold before—"

"Speak out, man," Rolf growled. "What must I do to prove to you you're free?"

Tazor tossed the wolf paw into the air—caught it. "This could be but a trick," he said. "In the bazaars of Alexandria I've seen fakirs turn iron rods to snakes. I've seen a dog be-headed and then go about its business sniffing in the rubble. Yet all was fraud, done by suggestion of the fakir into the minds of those who watched. The witch you tell of could be no more than they. A creature with the ability to creep into men's minds and leave her own will there."

Lars blinked. "The man speaks wisdom. If one grows as wise as this by being a slave, we should all spend a few years in chains."

Tazor's smile was a brief and fleeting thing. "I do not call this fraud. I only say it could be. But as to its being so, there is one point that gives me pause."

"And that?"

"You say this witch told you the earth is round and that all the stars above are also round—other earths we see at night because the sun reflects against them."

"That she told me," Rolf said.

"All that is truth, and no magic is involved. Wise men have discovered these things by human means but are afraid to speak out for fear of being tortured and killed."

"Then Hangra spoke the truth!" Lars said.

"That, to me," Tazor said, "is the strange part of it. How this witch in

the northern wilds can know these things is far beyond me."

"She is very old," Rolf said. "I have known of her since my childhood. She could have come from some far place."

"Driven away for speaking the truth possibly. But on one point she is in error."

Lars could bend in any direction with the slightest breeze. He said, "Ho! You caught one of her lies? I spotted several myself."

"This god she sent you to slay. He is no god, When the time comes—if it does—for you to drive your sword into him, you will find him flesh. Even though he comes from some far world in a ship we do not understand, he is mortal. That I know."

"And why are you so sure?"

"First, there is the tendency of all mortals to blame all they do not understand on gods. Hangra had wind of something she did not understand and so she calls the perpetrator—this interloper from the void—a god.

"Second, you were selected to oppose him because of your girth and strength. Probably no man on this earth or from any other world could stand before you. But what chance would you with your puny steel—or any of us have—against a supernatural entity?"

Rolf's eyes burned. "Such wisdom from a man who spent his life in slavery!"

"Any wisdom I have gained," Tazor said, with the same quick, fleeting smile, "is probably the result of being forced to keep my mouth shut and listen. One hears much in a lifetime."

ROLF TOOK the wolf paw into his hand and stared at it. "We'll still depend on this," he said.

"Of course. But depend more on

what is in your own heart; in the confidence you have in your own destiny. What place was it you saw while in your trance?"

"There were high, rugged mountains, raging storms and flying snow so thick you couldn't see your hand."

"That could be in the mountains north of the Roman boot. Or further east, where the backbone of the world runs like a spine above the land called India."

"But the place we seek," Rolf said, "was bare of snow, and warm. There was broad blue water and a place this ship of space could come to earth."

"India's holy men tell of such places in the highest mountain spine. But how a witch so far away could know—"

Lars yawned, then slapped the Nubian cheerfully upon the back. "Enough of this deep talk. So much wisdom in so short a time fai spins my brain. It's time for food and ale. The rest will keep."

"I am without hunger now," the Nubian said. "I'll take the place of Jorgen. I'm sure he thirsts for ale far more than I."

"My appetite is also gone," Rolf said, and moved toward the bow where he stood deep in thought. Soon he was scowling and in his eyes was a look of bewilderment. He shook his great yellow mane like a bull beset by insects. "Something full strange is happening to me," he muttered.

And truly, it was strange indeed. Since Rolf had awakened from his sleep, his very mind seemed changed. He had become conscious, it appeared, of a new, invisible world within the air. Now and again there were soft, vague whisperings in his ears. And yet not so, but rather in his brain. Not words, spoken in sound, but images of thought, complete and whole, projected from without.

It was as though his mental eyes had been opened to a vast new vista of thought-traffic flowing constantly; but still like whisperings in a dark room. Just now, as the dragon-ship clove west, and Lars went unperturbed about his meal, Rolf felt the impact of a message spanning space. His new-found senses told him it was from the mind of Hangra in the hills. The message came, but it was not for him.

This he knew, because the message was a plea—the calling of a name repeated many times.

Rollo—Rollo—Rollo, far in the land of Gaul. Rollo who has a mighty cross of gold—give ear!

Again and again the image picture came until the bewildered Rolf felt a sense of guilt, as though he crouched to listen by a wall. Suddenly he turned and bawled aloud: "Lars! I have changed my mind. Pour me a horn of ale. I'll drink with you!"

Book 2

The Scourge of Mars

LORK, THE Hermit Scientist of Mars, stood at the highest window of his isolated tower and watched the destruction of a planet. He was a handsome man this Lork, by Martian standards. He stood four feet two inches in height—quite tall. His body was acceptably spindling and insignificant and his magnificent head measured twenty-eight inches from ear to ear. This afforded him a brain pan unmatched in size by any on the planet. Also, the ray examination given by law to all Martians revealed his brain surface as having over a foot of channeling to the square inch. In short, Lork was one of the most notable achievements of a twenty-thousand-year-old civilization. A human brain developed to its ultimate.

WHOM THE GODS WOULD SLAY

His broad face was entirely expressionless as he studied the devastation going on about him—as he looked out over the wide plains stretching in all directions from his tower, to see the solid mass of voracious black destruction.

It came in a great arc, this dark wall, moving ever forward to cover the land with itself. Before it, and disappearing relentlessly under the wall, were the green fields, the forests, the homes, the great farms that had fed all Mars. Here and there on the panorama before Lork, a scattering of Martians in twos, threes, and small groups, staggered across the fields and waded the streams in a vain attempt to avoid their certain fate.

But these last few moved slowly now, their strength almost gone. They were only a handful to the multitudes, almost the entire population of the planet, that had already fallen and been consumed by the black wall during the six awful months of its existence.

Lork, tiring of the distant black monotony, desired a closer look. He shut his eyes and projected a mental reflector across the green area surrounding his tower, thus bringing the moving wall within a few feet of his scrutiny.

The ants, of which it was made up, were jet black and about five inches in length. They had four legs on each side of their tuberous bodies, and each one possessed a pair of mandibles capable of snapping a fragment of rock into two fragments. Their speed was amazingly swift—a steady forward sweep of slightly over seven miles an hour, and they left nothing in their path. The forward edge of the wall got the cream of the forage, of course, but the hungrier waves coming along behind consumed the very fiber of the trees and the remains of animal structures right down to

the last fragment of bone.

The Ants of Lall left behind them only the rock and earth they walked upon.

LORK'S MENTAL processes now were based primarily upon the fact that he could do nothing about this destruction. Therefore, he viewed it with an entirely objective attitude. He was incapable of emotions such as hate, greed, fear, regret, so the approaching moment of his own destruction and that of the few students he housed in his tower, was a matter of no great interest.

No—not entirely true. There was a tinge of regret in his mind, but for the reason that he must die with certain questions unanswered; questions concerning this ant horde of Lall's. Computing swiftly, Lork ascertained to a nicety his own life expectancy. It came to three hours and slightly more than nine minutes. He didn't bother cutting it any finer than that, and immediately turned his mind again to the major question that plagued him.

As a preliminary, he created an immense mental reflector and boarded it, so to speak, for a trip around the planet. The job of destruction, he saw, was almost completed. From pole to pole, the ant hordes lay from three to four inches thick on more than nine-tenths of the planet. The final tenth would soon be covered.

But not quite all of it, and that was what puzzled Lork. As he spanned and respanned the globe, he visited again the tiny sanctuaries, the small havens invariably shunned by the ant hordes. These sanctuaries were of course crowded with Martians. It was amazing to see the ant wall split as one of these small areas was approached, surge around it in two directions, and merge again on the far side. Of course these places were but false security for the refugees crowded into them.

The Martians so sheltered would die in the end regardless—die of want and starvation. But the point of interest to Lork was the fact that the ants avoided—without exception—every shrine and place of worship on Mars. These and these alone were the sanctuaries.

This completely baffled Lork's superbly objective and scientific mind. He was not averse to orthodox religion, but neither was he a religious man. He had visited the great shrines and had found the cool interiors restful and refreshing. He had admired the fine works of art on the altars, but the spiritual significance of these temples of orthodox religion failed to touch him. Even now, with surviving Martians hailing their temporary deliverance as a miracle—knowing beyond all doubt that their god was protecting them—Lork refused to accept this as an answer.

WHY, HE asked himself again and again, do the ants avoid the shrines? He did not wish to die with this knowledge ungained.

He had wrestled with the problem for an hour and a half now, and he was going to have to give it up because there was another question to be answered. This last was not a scientific conundrum, but it interested him nonetheless. It concerned Lall.

Why was she destroying the planet upon which she herself had to live? Was not this the equivalent of suicide? Why was she doing this?

Seeking an answer, Lork projected to that small portion of the planet he had not recently visited, the high polar cap where Lall made her headquarters. She was, of course, in no danger from the ants, nor was her small band of husbands, but she and they depended—as did all other Martians—upon the edible outgrowths of the planet itself. Yet she was destroy-

ing the surface of this planet as fast as she could manage it.

Lork was cognizant of Lall's mental makeup. She was enjoying all this immensely. Since the fool Martian Council had banished her to the pole—instead of executing her as Lork had recommended—her great ambition had been to avenge the insult and humiliation. But she was no fool. Certainly she would not do this at the expense of her own destruction. She must have a plan, and Lork yearned, in an entirely abstract manner of course, to know what it was.

He brought his mental projection to bear on the polar cap, arriving there just as Lall, surrounded by her five husbands, approached the vast dome-shaped building around which the other buildings clustered and stood waiting for the door to open.

Lork studied Lall with objective curiosity. He knew what she was, of course; nothing more nor less than a huge queen ant. A most interesting history had preceded her.

She had been born of normal parents—a male and female antedating the great two-hundred-year Improvement Period, that era when the human race was scientifically up-bred just as cattle had been scientifically up-bred generations before, and with just as brilliant results. As cattle were bred for meat, so were humans bred for brain and intelligence. They diminished in stature and broadened in skull capacity and scope of intellect.

There were various phases of experimentation, of course, before the correct formula was hit upon, some of which was to the eternal disgrace of all Mars. This last—in the main—by a clique of scientists who came momentarily into power and attempted to transplant the unerring and little understood instincts of certain insects into the perfect human male and

female. They were caught up with and speedily eliminated, these fanatics, and it was believed they did little damage. In fact, their tampering was all but forgotten when—ten generations later—Lall was born to obscure and apparently normal parents.

SHE WAS a throwback of the most startling kind. Physically, she represented the perfect female form of the pre-enlightened age; tall, with smoothly rounded limbs, prominent breasts, and all the facial beauty with which uncontrolled nature endowed females for the purpose of attracting and stimulating males and thus increasing the birthrate. Had this been the entire extent of her peculiarities, she would have been merely a lovely, but rather sad freak. A lonesome beauty in an enlightened age that had no need of female beauty.

But Lall developed other tendencies; sexual appetites that bordered upon the obscene and were thus classed until she was examined by the Martian Medical Board and the truth became known; that the unfortunate creature had borne the brunt of those awful experiments of the long ago. Physically she was a woman, but her off-spring assumed a far different shape. Startled doctors were forced clear down the insect gamut to the queen ant in order to find a counterpart to Lall's procreational activities.

Mentally, the insect world had captured her completely. She had the instincts to a nicety—all the cunning and the sadistic cruelty of the ant. These traits, coupled with unusual human intelligence, made her a problem over which the responsible elements of Martian society had to pass judgement.

The verdict was exile, and that verdict, rendered without the authorities knowing of Lall's vast physical resources and procreational powers,

set the death seal upon a planet. The execution of that planet was now being carried on.

All this flashed through Lork's mind while he watched Lall as she waited for the door of the great building to open. And also, just before the answer to his second question was revealed.

This answer came when the door opened and he followed Lall and her husbands inside the building; when he saw the ship.

Lork's surprise was deep and genuine because this space ship he was staring at had no legal right to exist. Ten years prior to this time—shortly after the first successful space flight to the smaller of Mars' two moons—space ships and space flights had been outlawed by the Supreme Council as being contrary to the long-range principal of isolationism written into the Second Martian Constitution eleven centuries before.

The four ships known to have existed had been cut up and turned into scrap metal. Or so it had been announced. Evidently, Lall had found a way to corrupt certain public officials.

THIS, HOWEVER, did not interest Lork to any great extent. Of more importance to him was the fact that one of his questions was answered. Lall had no intention of remaining on Mars to starve. She planned, obviously, to leave the dead planet and seek a home somewhere else in the solar system. But where?

This, Lork speedily learned as he moved close to peer over her shoulder while she studied a solar map handed her by one of her husbands. A planet was encircled thereon. The one closest to Mars and slightly nearer the sun. Quite logical, Lork thought.

At that moment, a hand touched

Lork's shoulder. He started, glanced around, and was again standing, both physically and mentally, at the high window in his tower. Pralt, one of his students, coughed apologetically as he withdrew his hand.

"Sorry," Lork said, "I was projecting."

"Didn't mean to disturb you. Just wanted to call your attention to the ants. They're almost to the base of the tower. It won't be long now."

Lork glanced down. "You're right. We won't have long to wait. It will be interesting—the experience of death."

"I'm looking forward to it. So are the others."

"By the way, my projection was quite successful. I answered one of the questions."

"Really? Why do the ants avoid the shrines?"

"Not that one. I discovered why Lall is not afraid to destroy Mars. She has a space ship. She is going to the planet called Earth."

"Ah! Official corruption. Too bad there's no use doing anything about it."

"Have you ever been to Earth?" Lork asked.

"No. I've tried, but I've never been able to project that far."

"I made it twice. Very backward planet. Still slicing each other up with knives. Not a bad lot though."

Pralt sighed. "Certainly wish we could figure out why the ants avoid the shrines."

Lork glanced down to where the ants were exploring the lower bastions of the tower. It was only a matter of nine and three-quarter minutes now. "Why don't you work a few more equations on it?" Lork said. "I'd do it, but I'm going to be rather busy."

"Doing what?"

"Try to warn Earth of Lall's coming. I think I can push some tele-

pathic pictures through."

"But you say they're backward. There won't be a mind on Earth capable of receiving the pictures."

"Maybe not, but it's worth a try. An attempt will satisfy my sense of justice."

"In the meantime, I'll try some advanced theoretical equations on that shrine problem."

THE TWO scientists placidly seated themselves, and each went about his work as the sound of ant mandibles grinding through rock became audible from below. Lork's huge head quivered as he created an electrical field around it. He closed his eyes and his magnificent brain began functioning—creating clear mental pictures and hurling them out into the void. The space ship was excellent material with which to work. It had color and size, two of the pre-requisites for the ideal mental image.

Meanwhile, Pralt sat with folded hands, building and rejecting equations with a speed that turned his thought-channel into a silver blur. Because time was limited, he also adopted a color pattern, designating red as the unvarying clue. That way he could spin the equations through his brain without check and merely watch for a flash of red.

The minutes passed. The sound of a million ant-claws climbing the tower was first a faint whisper; then it became the sound of wind blowing across a field of ripe grain. Now the grinding of ten million jaws as the ants did away with the sashes of the lower windows. The tower trembled. There was a dread and fateful sound in the stair-tunnel outside the door.

Pralt saw a flash of red in his thought train.

Glancing at the door, he flung his mind after the stained equation and dragged it back. If they would only

give him a few more seconds. The door shivered, bent like paper, disappeared.

"I've got it," Pralt said. "The shrine is *Y shaded*—the ant horde, *calandra theorized*."

Lork rationalized it and allowed himself an instant of mild surprise. "Well I'll be damned," he said. "I'll try and tell Earth."

But he never knew whether or not he succeeded. A moment later he was experiencing the equation of death.

LALL, ALL her evil beauty glowing, fiercely joyful, looked down from the port window of the space ship as it blasted up into the thin atmosphere over Mars. It was a black planet now; a globe covered with crawling, twisting death; a symbol of her triumph—her magnificent revenge.

"Tell the pilot to circle once or twice," she said. "I want to look it all over before we go."

One of the huge-headed husbands who gave her constant attendance, sprang up to relay the order. As the ship levelled away on a fiery tail to skim the black surface below, Lall declaimed for the benefit of her three remaining spouses: "They know now what it means to humiliate me."

The Martian men replied in unison: "Yes, Lall."

"Never was a revenge so complete—so entirely satisfactory."

"No, Lall."

Knowing full well what kept these miserable males in line, Lall turned casually, opened her robe, readjusted and belted it while pretending not to hear the collective catching of their breath.

"That despicable Lork! The one who recommended my death. I would like to have witnessed his final agonies. How he must have writhed and screamed!"

"Yes, Lall."

She turned and flung up her lovely arms in a gesture of triumph. "Lork and all of them! That stupid Council! Those doctors who examined me as though I were a freak! The wives who screamed for my death, The husbands who allowed me to be exiled and shamed. All of them died in agony and I rejoice! Do you hear that? Rejoice!"

"Yes, Lall."

She turned again to the window and—looking down—she softened. A tender light came into her eyes. "My ants," she whispered. "My poor, poor ants. Nothing more to eat. No one to watch over them. They too must die."

"Yes, Lall."

"But it will be a worthy death and they will not mind because they love me as I love them." She lowered her eyes under thick, dark lashes and looked like nothing so much as a beautiful virgin, trembling in anticipation of her wedding night. "But there will be more ants. Many more."

The husbands leaned forward and put eagerness into their reply: "Yes, Lall!"

"Now I tire," Lall said. "Tell the pilot I have kissed my brood goodbye. Off to the far planet and new conquests!" Her voice softened, "Tell him also that he will be favored this night."

THE MARTIAN men drooped a trifle upon hearing this, each because of his own personal disappointment. Yet it was perfectly proper, because the pilot was Lall's fifth husband.

"You may leave now," she said. "I would rest."

"Yes, Lall," they replied, and trooped out.

Alone, the ant queen lay down upon her lounge and closed her eyes. She was weary, what with the tremendous strain of arranging everything and the

prolonged period of egg-laying which preceded her savage destruction of all living things on Mars.

But even above that, there was *the problem* adding mental strain to the physical. Lall knew without being told—knew from age-old instinct—that continued procreation was as necessary to her as the air she breathed. The law which governed her existence was clear on that point: Breed or die. Perpetuate or wither into a husk and blow away.

She found no personal pleasure in this monotonous process and often cried out against her unhappy fate. But, nonetheless she was forced to face it and the problems it conjured up.

The greatest of these was males to use in this unending process. She had had a great deal of trouble on that score all during her mature life. Martian civilization had gone through the period of enlightenment long before she had been born, and a great majority of the Martian males looked upon her physical beauty with complete disinterest. The five husbands she now possessed had been gotten only after long and weary searching. And invariably, the Martian male who responded to mere physical beauty was an inferior specimen. This hurt the quality of the eggs she produced, a thing she bitterly resented. Mulling the problem over in her mind, she thought with fierce joy of the ten and twelve inch ants she could produce with virile mating. And also came the gnawing worry relative to the five husbands she had. They would not last much longer. All too soon they would become hollow shells, husks to wither and die as she herself would wither and die if she found no males to replace them.

Then, deeply weary, her eyelids drooped and she slept like a tired, beautiful child.

ROLLO THE Viking was the happiest of men. Not filled with the wild, false happiness he'd come to know in his more violent years, but deeply ingrained now with a contentment he had earned through long hours of penance and meditation.

With sorrow, he had watched his true friend Rolf turn coldly northward; stared with tear-filled eyes as the dragon-ship heeled the breeze and rode away down the wide Gallic river toward the sea.

But he sent a blessing on the wind to guard the mighty Rolf and see him safely home. Then he turned with a heavy heart toward his own sorry affairs.

So much there was to remember and regret; so many hours of repentant agony to be spent at the foot of the cross before the evil he had done could be atoned. But there were times of great joy, also. These came when he was privileged to pore over the old documents, the priceless parchments that told of Christ the Savior.

To the changed Rollo, each of the carefully scrolled words of the patient monks was a burning symbol; and the meaning of the words and phrases thrilled him to his very soul.

Once his heart had been touched by the magic of the Galilean, he had gone doggedly and methodically about the doing of what had to be done. He had knelt before the good monks and then had arisen to break his sword over his knee. Next, under their direction, his loot had been distributed among the poor until he had not a coin nor a piece of silver.

Then had come the penance; the hours and days on the cold stone before the church clad in but sackcloth with ashes on his head and sorrow in his heart.

Slowly, magically, the cleansing process was completed and came the day the good friar lifted him and

said, "Arise, my son and look upon the cross. Your heart is pure."

And such gladness went through the being of Rollo, he could scarce contain it. He looked for one glorious instant upon the glowing symbol of Christianity and murmured, "Oh Lord, I am not worthy," whereupon he again fell to his knees and prayed until the sweat stood out on his great muscles and he was like to faint.

Then he rose up and went about another duty; went straight to the cottage of Madella, the slim girl he'd seen first below his upraised sword and later in a burst of white, revealing light.

He sat beside her and took her hand in his and said, "I came to ask great happiness from you."

She smiled. "My hand?"

He shook his head. "Nay—release from my promise to you."

Her smile faded and there was sadness in her great brown eyes. "You do not love me?"

"It is not that. I think I love you more than any man. But I would take the greatest of all vows. I would vow chastity and service to Him from this day on. I love you well and you love me. But beside our love for Him, all else fades to a feeble glow."

She said, "I understand and I rejoice that I have seen this miracle occur. Such a short time ago, you came from down the river shouting oaths—filled with dark deeds and lust for our blood. And now I see a saint before my eyes."

He pressed her hand. "Far from a saint. Merely a humble one who wants to serve. Do I have your permission?"

"Go with God. I'll pray for you."

HE KISSED her lips and went back to the church; into the monastery of the monks to stand before the kindly abbey there. "I beg to spend my days within these walls.

Give me the meanest duties in your house. I'll mop the floors or plant the land or wash the tired feet of those who work. Command me, Father."

The keen and wise eyes of the abbey studied Rollo's face. His silence lasted while the sun bent down to bathe the room in fire through the deep-stained glass. Then he arose from his chair and told Rollo, "Come with me."

Rollo looked with wonder on the place they went. The abbey smiled and motioned toward the walls. "There," he said, "is our greatest treasure; the books and scrolls and manuscripts on which our faith is based. The word of God told in many ways and in many languages. This is your place, my son. Read, study, learn the tongues; and store up all the knowledge you can hold. This you must do, for even now I sense your destiny. The Church has need of fire such as yours."

The shorn Viking went joyfully to work and the day came swiftly when a papal scroll arrived: "*From this day hence—Rollo, Bishop of Ellenstein.*"

Rollo was taken with consternation. He said, "Father—I do not understand. The time has been so short."

Again the abbey smiled. "These are thin and dangerous years for Mother Church. Think not but what His Holiness considered well. You are tied with a silver cord to the Great Heart beating down in Rome."

Later, deep in his joy, Rollo called out, "We'll have one rich treasure here. A golden cross so great that none but a *norseman* has the strength to carry it. Call all the goldsmiths in!"

And it was done.

AT TWILIGHT, Rollo loved to walk in the cool gardens beside his modest dwelling place. Here he

could be alone among the flowers; could marvel at the wonders Heaven wrought upon the earth; could seek to come in rapport with his God.

Upon this night, he stayed quite late, breathing the cool perfumes. Then, suddenly, he sought the abbey out. Found the good cleric in his austere room.

The abbey sprang up all confused to say, "My son, it is not meet that you should come to me. You had but to raise your voice."

Rollo waved an impatient hand. "I would consult you here. Sit down by me."

They sat side by side on the hard iron bed and Rollo spoke: "I seek the counsel of your experience. A strange thing just occurred."

"What thing?"

"I was walking in the garden and it seemed that someone spoke to me."

"Some passerby no doubt."

"Not so. This voice was not a voice, but something more. A wave of consciousness that swept through me in silence and yet it was far more clear than any spoken word."

"A picture printed on the mind?"

"Aye—that."

"Describe the scene."

Rollo's brow was furrowed deep with thought before his words would come. "Strange. It should be a simple thing to do—yet it is not. One thing is clear. I saw a giant ship drawing a tail of fire across the sky. A ship the like of which no man has known. It was coming from some far place beyond the sky and rocketing toward earth like a falling star."

The abbey pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Strange—strange indeed."

"There was a mist far stranger yet that covered it. Or possibly a mist around my mind. At any rate, I sought to judge the thing—to see what lay within—but I could not. It was as if the substance blurred, but the essence

stood out crystal clear."

"And that essence—?"

"Was *evil*! So evil that I paled and felt a wave of weakness in my knees. Then, Father, I knew beyond all doubt that I must take my cross and go forth to meet this ship."

The abbey raised a hand and scratched his shaven pate. "The waters here are deep and dangerous. I scarce know what to think."

"The call to go was clear as any call I ever had."

The abbey still stared at the floor. "You tell me this—confide in me. Now tell me how you want me to reply."

"So I will know if I must go or stay."

THE ELDER man sat silent for a time—then raised his eyes and slowly shook his head. "That, my son, I cannot do. This only may I say: You are the Bishop here—not I. Your hand is in the Hand of God—not mine. It ill behooves a waddling duck to tell an eagle where to fly. The decision must be yours and yours alone."

Rollo sat for a time, sore troubled. Then the abbey said, "But this I tell you. I'll stake my love of truth on your decision whether it's to go or stay."

Rollo got suddenly to his feet. He took the old man's hand. "Thank you, Father. Now I know. I must obey the call. Come you with me to get the golden cross."

"You go alone?"

"I go alone."

"But where?"

Rollo stopped and stood deep in thought. "To the west. To a place where the river bends, then slightly north. I have no fear. I will be led aright."

Still troubled, the abbey said, "But all alone and carrying the cross. It is

so large two ordinary men can scarcely lift up its weight."

Rollo laughed. "You forget my heritage. I was a Viking in my wilder days. And in all the *norseland*, only one had greater strength than I."

"And who was he?"

"Rolf of the Golden Horn—God love his mighty heart!"

"And God preserve his soul. Farewell, Rollo, Bishop of Ellenstein. My prayers walk with you."

A few minutes later, an insomnia-ridden townsman glanced through the window of his poor hut to see the Bishop walking up the street. His Grace wore a gold-stitched yellow robe and on his head was the glittering mitre of his office. But stranger still, he carried in his two hands the golden cross no other man could lift.

The townsman spent a moment steeped in indecision. Then he hurried to his pallet to lie down trembling—to pull the ragged blanket over his head.

LALL PACED the confines of her cabin on the Martian space ship as it hurtled through black void. Now and again she stopped to peer out the window. But there was nothing to be seen but pitch-blackness.

Even the sun had vanished. At first this phenomenon frightened Lall. But one of her husbands explained that this was to be expected. There was nothing against which it could shine; nothing to refract its rays. This calmed Lall's fears but did nothing to still the hot fires burning within her.

Memories of her Martian triumph helped some. She spent a great deal of the time in recalling details of her vengeance and regretting it could not have been more terrible.

Also, she planned. If this planet they approached was inhabited by intelligent beings, she could have more

happy hours. What she had done on Mars had kindled within her a fire which until now had only smouldered. Nothing in her lifetime had given her such pleasure as she'd gotten from witnessing the vast destruction. There would be more of it. Vengeance upon the whole solar system. The thought thrilled her. Planet after planet swept clean of all life save hers. The whole of known space populated only with the life she herself had created.

The possibility made her dizzy from the suggested scope of its power.

Finally the hour arrived when the space ship moved into a twilight zone and her pilot husband came to tell her the journey was almost completed. He pointed forward through the window.

"Our planet is only a few thousand miles ahead. I've cut speed. We'll circle it and see what we can find out."

Lall stared at the great globe. It was covered with a peculiar colorless pattern ranging from white to dark gray. There was much more of the white and the darker hues than the intermediate.

The pilot explained: "The white and very dark indicates the planet is covered mainly with ice and water. The intermediate shades are the land masses."

Lall frowned. "There's very little land, it seems."

"No. The ratio is close to ideal. I'm almost certain the planet is inhabited."

"But by what manner of creatures do you suppose?"

THE PILOT, though a miserable and spineless creature in the hands of Lall, had an average Martian brain which meant his intelligence far transcended any found on Earth. "I'd say they are not a great deal different from ourselves. Basically, the evolutionary process is the same everywhere. If the higher forms of life

can exist at all on a planet, they would develop pretty much the same as on every inhabitable world. The conditions on the planet below should not differ greatly from those on our own world. We are pretty sure to find that the ruling race of creatures stands erect on two legs, has at least two arms and certainly hands with a well developed thumb attached."

Lall was interested. "How do you know these things?"

"Because the things I mentioned are causes, not results. They make the ruling race."

The planet had changed a great deal now as the ship circled it to slip gradually into the atmosphere surrounding it. Now the sun blazed forth and the color spectrum was again in evidence.

After use of an enlarging glass, the pilot reported to Lall: "The planet is inhabited, but not thickly. There are whole continents apparently uninhabited. Portions of other continents have a fairly thick dispersion of life, evidently both human and animal. The population is thickest, of course, in metropolitan areas, and these seem to be most numerous on the coasts of the continents.

"This indicates primitive methods of transportation, most long-distance hauls being made by water. Hence, a backward civilization in early stages of development. I see no sign whatever of air craft."

"How are the humans built physically?"

"Close observation is not possible at this speed, but from what I can see, they do not differ greatly from ourselves."

Lall pondered this information. The pilot asked, "What are your orders, Lall?"

"We are well armed, but still they may be dangerous. They'd probably try to destroy anything they don't

understand, and we could be overwhelmed. Therefore, we'd better select a landing field on the edge of a thinly populated area away from the cities. That will give us an opportunity to get our bearings and plan our future course."

THE PILOT made one more trip around and then cut speed as he flashed over what appeared to be the highest mountain range on the planet. He glided down the far side, over vast stretches of desolate, lonesome country. There he found the twisted course of a river cutting into the western part of the great continent below him to originate in the mountains to the northward.

"I see a likely spot there ahead," the pilot told Lall. "Wide, flat grassland on the bank of the river just by a small island. A snow-capped mountain range protects it on one side. In the other direction are dense forests."

Lall smiled. "Set down the ship. It seems an excellent spot." A look of tenderness was in her eyes. "Forests. Food for my ants—until they find red meat."

The ship came in smoothly under the skilled hand of the giant-headed Martian. He gauged the long, grassland runway to a nicety, bringing the vessel down with the nose tilted at just the right angle, the exhausts mixed to exactly the correct coloring to keep from sending the spaceship end over end.

The job finished, he breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the perspiration from his broad forehead. Lall smiled and rewarded him with a kiss. This, he obviously thought, was reward enough for any man. He raised his eyes to hers and trembled; but she straightened and the softness left her, her mind now encompassed with pressing problems.

The quartzite forward window revealed no dangers as she and her husband gazed out upon the new planet. "Everything seems much the same as we left behind us," the pilot said.

Lall smiled and the spreading of her lips revealed white sharp teeth back in her lovely mouth. "Not quite the same," she said.

"I meant the same as our planet used to be, except the growing things here—the trees and grass—are of a much paler hue."

"That's true. Not nearly so dark as ours."

"I see no signs of either human or animal life."

"We'll never find out standing here. Open the port and run out the ramp."

The pilot obeyed with some hesitation. Steeling his courage—what little of it he had—he led the way down the ramp and became the first Martian to place feet on the soil of Earth. It was to him, however, a dubious honor. He shared with many Martians—except those with completely developed abstract minds—an overabundance of physical cowardice. This base emotion was of course bred out of such Martians as Lork and Pralt. But in the common run of Martian males, those found still clinging to the exaggerated sexual urge were also supercharged with almost child-like timidity.

YET, IN the presence of Lall, the pilot tried valiantly to hide this weakness. He stood on the green grass of the valley with a flash-pistol gripped tightly in his fist. Close to him, Lall stood erect in beauty and arrogance, her head thrown back, hands braced against lovely hips, as she surveyed the valley.

Her other four husbands hung back near the ramp, set to dive into the bowels of the ship at the least sign of danger. Only the fear of earning

Lall's contempt had brought them forth at all.

"A likely place," the Ant Queen said.

"Yes, Lall," they echoed.

She laid a hand on the shoulder of her pilot husband. "I think you'd better do a little exploring. Circle around the whole area. See how deep the river is and find out if it can be crossed. See if any creatures are hiding in the trees."

"Yes, Lall," he gulped. Fearful as he was, he would die before letting her sense it, which was, of course, a kind of courage in itself.

He moved forward gingerly, stepping gently as though afraid of disturbing the grass under his feet. He felt a pain, a dull ache in his right hand—and realized it came from the agonized grip with which he enfolded the butt of his pistol.

After some progress downriver, he glanced back and his heart came close up in his throat as he saw that two hundred yards separated him from the safety of the ship. Lall waved a hand. He waved back, glad she could not see the sickly smile on his face. Turning again, he steeled himself. He must go on. The next time he turned to look, the ship was out of sight.

Gradually, as he traveled on, his fears lessened. This seemed an utterly deserted place. And pleasant, too. The air was pleasingly warm; the whispering of the trees in the forest he skirted was a sound of welcome and companionship.

There was a rather heavy drag upon his legs, an increased effort necessary to push one foot in front of the other; but this he understood. The atmosphere on this planet was denser than that on his home planet and the magnetic drag was greater.

But all in all, he suffered no great difficulty, and turned finally to test the depth of the river. At this par-

ticular spot it was quite broad and the waters showed no perceptible movement. He put a foot into it, found a bottom of hard sand, and moved out into the stream until the water licked at his belt.

This, he found, was its greatest depth. He waded on, leaning against the slow pull of the current, and stepped finally onto the other bank.

A QUICK spasm of fear shot through him as he realized how broadly he was cut off from the safety of the ship. Then the fear quieted somewhat, but it was with slow and careful steps that he approached the fringe of the forest.

Now it seemed not nearly so friendly and companionable. It was a forbidding wall, remindful of another wall he'd seen on his native planet not too long before. One that went forward tumbling always over itself and leaving no living thing in its path except the wall itself.

But the forest wall stood as in silent contemplation of the great-headed little creature that approached it. The pilot was walking on tiptoe now—carefully—ready to spring and run at an instant's notice. Slowly, he moved in among the trees.

A slight sound to the left hurled him against a tree trunk where he crouched with his pistol poised. The sound was a rattling of dead leaves near another tree. He held his breath, and a moment later the bright, sharp eyes of a small animal were peering up at him.

The creature had a tail larger than itself; a tail of which it seemed inordinately proud. The appendage plumbed up behind the creature's small back and stood even higher than the perky head which was now tilted in inquiry.

The little animal made a remark in

a questioning tone, but the Martian pilot was at a loss to understand the words. Then, a threatening gesture from its paw set the Martian trembling. Obviously, the little animal could move like lightning. Suppose it were poisonous? In the twinkling of an eye, it could leap forward and sink its teeth in his leg.

The creature was indeed fast of movement. Its tiny paws were shifted so swiftly the eye could not follow them. As if by magic, a second of the creatures appeared and stood beside the first. Blindly, the pilot raised his gun and fired. There was the soft whirr of the charge clearing the barrel; the quick, bright, soundless explosion as it hit the target.

The pilot lowered the gun and stared at the hollowed out concavity in the earth where the inquisitive squirrels had stood. They were not there any more. Neither was the grass upon which they stood.

With his fear heightened, the pilot wondered if his act would possibly bring swift reprisal from others of the tiny breed. In his mind was a picture of ten billion ants cleaning off the surface of Mars. What if the forest suddenly became alive with even ten thousand of these outraged little rodents? His gun would be of little value.

As he backed away toward the river, the pilot experienced a grim sense of satisfaction. Regardless of the timidity he knew was a part of him, he'd nonetheless landed upon a strange planet and had defended himself from the first threat to his safety.

The second threat, however, was a far different proposition. He turned after walking backward some hundred feet toward the river and saw this threat looming over him. Now

he knew the very essence of terror as the gun hung limply in his paralyzed fingers.

IN A BROAD, pleasant valley in eastern Gaul, a band of some hundred wandering Mongols camped by a blue river to rest themselves and lick their wounds. The battle had occurred not at this place, but further up the river, and the Mongols had moved lower down in order not to camp so near the corpses strewn about.

Night had fallen now and the yellow-skinned warriors squatted about in attitudes of ease. There was talk and hearty gusts of laughter at some kill recounted, some deed of slaughter lived again.

Others there were who sat in silence scowling over wounds received that day. The eyes of these moved often and again to four dark mounds—four heaps of roped-down flesh—that lay all helpless by the Chieftain's tent. And all the warriors marvelled, wondering how the chance encounter with four men could have ended up with twenty Mongols rotting on the river bank.

Three were of yellow hair, giants in stature, from the northern lands. The other, a Nubian scarcely smaller than the other three in muscled girth.

But the Mongols were of a number doubled many times by four and all were mounted well and spoiling for a fight. By the ancient idols! How could four men slash with such abandon, with such power? How could four men afoot—giants withall—form such a front that onslaught after onslaught of a mounted force went down and crawled away on bloody sands?

And then—more strange by far—how could these same four men so suddenly capitulate? Stop fighting? Stand with folded arms? Stand mute

and ask defeat? The Mongols shook their heads. Strange indeed were the ways of the blue-eyed men.

AND SORE bewildered also was the *norseman* Lars. Bound hand and foot he lay beside his fellows also bound. Long had he lain unconscious from a blow across the skull; a blow to send an ox to last oblivion. Lars opened now his eyes and blinked at the darkened sky. "By Tor!" he muttered. "What afterworld is this? Why are the gods not here to welcome me?"

Tazor, the Nubian, spoke, "Gently, my friend. The blow you took upon the head still rings among the hills."

"Seven I slew," Lars said. "Or was it nine or ten? I lost the count." Lars stopped to gather his scattered faculties. "Then—then—by Tor! I mind me now! Rolf ordered meek surrender, or so I thought. From force of habit I threw down my sword. But I must have been in error—"

"No error there." It was Rolf of the Golden Horn who spoke, lying trussed like a fowl beside the helpless Lars. "I gave the order."

Lars strove again to speak; could find no words. Then stated simply: "Reason has long since bade my mind good-bye."

"It was a masterly move, our surrendering."

"Your words but prove the fact of my insanity. I swear I heard you call our groveling masterly."

"Full well I did. Tazor evolved the plot and whispered to me just before we laid our weapons down."

"This fool," Lars said, "will be in your eternal debt if you'll but clarify."

"How many moon turns has it been since last you saw the fjord?"

"More than I care to count."

"How long since we left the water and the ship and followed the beating

of the wolf paw south?"

"Many," Lars growled. "Crawling like four great bugs across the rocks and up the hills of Gaul. Sometimes I feel I'm doomed to spend my latter days marching forever on beneath the sun."

"Well do you grasp my point. Now mind: We came into this valley and walked with the fall of the river, the wolf paw beating true. Ahead stretch many weary leagues, the only highway through this endless land."

"I listen," Lars returned, "but little do I hear."

"Bear with me. Now—today, there came this eastern horde bearing our way."

"No contradiction there."

"And at what speed! Did you mark the way they thundered on the mounts to eat up leagues like walrus snapping fish?"

"True."

"So, in a blaze of genius seldom duplicated here on earth, it did occur to Tazor they should take us with them at that speed."

"Vaguely I see it now. A master stroke. Glad I am that I have a skull thick enough to survive and enjoy it. But tell me this: How did great Tazor know they would not smash us down and leave us dead to feed the wolves?"

TAZOR answered for himself: "I know the ways of men. They all seek wealth. The four of us in the slave marts of the east would bring enough to fill the coffers of the Chieftain even though the coffers be as large as oil vats."

Lars sighed. "So be it. But I still think there could be found a simpler and less wearing way. Why did we not rout these devils and take four of their horses for ourselves?"

"Did you ever ride a horse?"

"No, but the process looks simplicity itself."

"Far from it. Left to themselves, these spirited animals would throw your bulk beyond the nearer peaks. When you came limping back, they'd be far gone."

"But how can the Mongols make the horses gentle down and let us ride?"

Rolf yawned prodigiously. "That," he said, "is a problem for the Mongols. Now we'd better sleep."

But before he closed his eyes, Rolf looked beyond Lars to the fourth dark pile and asked, "Jorgen? How fares it there with you?"

Jorgen rarely used words. For days on end he spoke not unless spoken to. He said, "I fare quite well, my Chief. Good dreams to you."

"And so to you, faithful Jorgen." Then Rolf slept.

Lars was not so easily satisfied. "Fortunate I am," he grumbled, "to be traveling with such shining strategists? Ere long they'll brilliantly arrange to have me in my grave."

Rolf's breathing was deep and even. And clutched in his good right fist, the wolf paw beat the even, steady rhythm of a heart.

The Mongols were astir before dawn. As he opened his eyes, Rolf saw the night guards already squatting at their food. He watched the stirrings of life come into the wild ferocious band. Those wounded in the battle of the previous day, growled and snarled so all could hear of the soreness of their wounds.

The fires were beaten up and meat thrown on to cook. A hobbling casualty came by and stopped to aim a kick with his good remaining leg at the sleeping Lars. The Viking moved. He opened his eyes to see the Nubian pull himself up to a sitting position.

"Ho, there!" Tazor called. "Food

for the prisoners! Else our weight will fall and we'll bring but a pittance in the mart of slaves."

The sour-faced Chieftain of the Mongols considered this, then motioned toward some crouching warriors. With ill-grace, they arose and brought a leg of meat to the shackled four. They kicked the Vikings into a haunched-up position and loosed the bonds upon their arms—ropes woven in far India, the toughest known.

ROLF TOOK the leg and tore it in four parts. The prisoners ate. But it was scarce enough and Lars, chewing a final bone, debated asking more. But he held his peace and rubbed the places where the ropes had cut his flesh.

The ropes were soon put back upon their arms and four dancing horses brought from out the pack. The legs of the four potential slaves were loosed and they were forked into the high-backed saddles on the mounts. Then the ropes were tied again beneath the bellies tight and hard.

They took the treatment in complete silence, all save Lars, who muttered, "Were this fool beast to catch on fire, 'twould be a sorry day for me indeed."

Soon the troop was ready to move. The Chieftain raised his hand and hoof-beats rose into a thunder. And even though sod was underfoot, a dustcloud billowed up to meet the rising sun.

The cavalcade moved at a gallop through the hours and the Vikings suffered tortures of the damned. Only the Nubian sat as one at home upon his horse and tried to tell the others how to lessen their own punishment.

"I'd take a thousand spears against my breast, drive devils mad to have my blood, in place of this," Lars said.

Through tight-set teeth, Rolf an-

swered, "Count up the days we gain by this great coup."

"They'll not half total all the blisters on my rump," Lars said, and then went grimly back to the business of suffering.

The sun moved high and still the Mongols made no move to rest. Time passed, and Lars moaned wearily. "The endurance of these yellow men is something to tell one's children of. Do we go on and on 'til only death relieves our agony?"

Forward they went on horses made of iron, tireless. Then, with the sun at quarter-sky, Rolf flashed a look at Lars. "The beat in the wolf paw fades! The time has come to go our separate way!"

They had come to a place where the placid river forked; one branch to turn along a mountain range, the other down a widening valley toward the blue and distant plains. The Mongols took the latter course and this—for many—brought on sudden death.

With a Viking cry, Rolf called to Lars, "Now is the time! Avenge your smarting rump!" Rolf took a mighty breath, and with one great flexing of his huge torso, he snapped his bonds like strings of brittle silk. A sudden whirlwind was this Viking Chief. One sweeping arm snatched up the sword of a Mongol riding close. An instant later that same Mongol's head bounced bloody on the ground to be kicked here and there by milling hooves. Like a whirling storm of death, Rolf cleared an area around about, then slashed with his sword the bonds that held his legs.

The Mongols rallied swiftly, and swords flashed, but not until Rolf had freed the helpless two. The Nubian, Tazor, was free himself, but not from strength. Rather from stealth he'd used to keep his muscles free when the bonds were fastened on.

IN AN instant Tazor had the weapon of a fallen yellow man. With superb disregard for his own blood, he charged the Mongol horde and cut a gore-stained furrow through their ranks.

Lars, by most happy chance, had gotten back his own great sword from the guard who carried it. He spurned his mount and got his two great feet again upon the ground. Then, with a shout of fiercest joy, he raised the blade above his head and it became a whirling scythe of death.

The Mongols broke and fell away in rank disorder 'til their Chieftain, caught off-guard by the savage suddenness of what had passed, came charging in. He led a deadly wedge of keen-edged blades.

Rolf snatched the shining Viking blade from Lars, dropping the Mongol short-sword he'd acquired, and roared at his companions, "Hold! This devil chief is mine!"

The Mongol thundered in, the great sword flashed. Then, for an instant on the bloody plain, the Mongol chief rode hard on a headless horse. As Rolf's blade came around again the horse went to its knees, following its severed head down to the ground. The Mongol chief pitched forward into the nicely balanced arc of Rolf's red blade. It severed him across, from hip to hip; half of his belt above and half below, his torso dropping off to sit down in the dust, the legs to stay entangled with the horse.

Lars, with the short-sword, waded roaring in, to stop two Mongols, swiftly sending them to whatever hell or heaven they merited. While Tazor, brilliant in his attack, drove back, with Jorgen, one wing of the foe.

Then it was over as the Mongol men, in losing their Chieftain also lost their nerve and broke to flee; on down the valley not to stop 'til Rolf, because of distance, could not say if they

were bugs or men.

Grimly the Vikings wiped their swords while Tazor bent to kill the gibbering screaming Mongol chief who lay, still living, on the gutted turf.

Then Tazor moved away, intentions plain, to capture Mongol horses standing by. But Lars called out, "Not one for me! I'll walk though it be twice ten thousand leagues." Jorgen then spoke up too—he of the frugal words—to growl, "I'll keep you company. For me the age of speed has not yet come."

Rolf scowled at them, then shrugged, "So be it, black man. We will stretch our legs. The leg was made for walking after all."

Tazor returned to them, and Rolf held up the talisman. "The way," he said, "leads down the nether branch along the mountain range."

LIMPING, THE Vikings took the smaller stream, striving to match the easy strides of Tazor, the Nubian. All day they marched, to stop when the sun went low and set the snares in which, luck willing, they would find enough to breakfast on. Then they lay down and slept.

They arose with the sun and broke their fast on four rabbits eaten raw before they started forward again. Just after high noon, Rolf stopped. With a slight frown, he drew the wolf paw from his belt. As it lay in his palm, there was visible evidence of renewed activity in its pulsing. Under their eyes, its movement increased until it lifted itself and fell to the ground.

"We are close," Rolf said. "We come to the end of our journey." He drew the great-sword from his belt. "Soon an evil god meets destiny."

As his words died away, they turned as one man to see a strange, grotesque form moving toward them. To make it

even more unbelievable, the creature, whether human or animal, was coming backwards from a strip of forest. He was of spindly, underfed body and wore a head the like of which no Viking nor Nubian had ever seen. A huge, misshapen head.

The creature backed relentlessly toward them, raising each small foot with great care in its turn, to set it down as though he walked on fragile eggs. As he moved nearer, he gripped some strange instrument in his right hand and stared at the harmless forest as though it were inhabited by devils.

The four stood motionless, overcome by sheer surprise. Now the creature was upon them. He turned and froze. On his face was written such abject terror as to be ludicrous.

Gently, Lars reached out and lifted the thing by its collar. He held it forth and spoke to Rolf: "Is this your evil god?"

Then Lars put it down and surrendered to great laughter. He slapped his thick thighs as the roaring of his merriment echoed through the trees. But only to laugh anew as the creature streaked away, its thin legs flying as it rounded the river bend and disappeared abreast of the island just in sight beyond.

As Lars' laughter died, Rolf slowly shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "That thing may be evil, but it isn't any god. Come."

They moved after it, walking lightly now. Lars' humor vanished as they watched, sharp-eyed, for movement anywhere. None was seen.

Now Rolf stopped suddenly and pointed on ahead. "Look you upon it there," he said. "A ship not built for sea or land. And in that ship sits the evil god!"

place the sun would rise. The night hours passed and dawn came softly up to kiss the far-off snow-capped mountain peaks. Morning—and then the sun vaulted the world's rim; and glittered on the great cross Rollo bore.

The way was level and easy, the grasses underfoot soft, as Rollo moved along the river bank. But mid-morning brought the end of easy paths. The country roughened and the grass grew sparse and thin. Rocky, the land, with scrub growth reaching out to catch his robes and make the going hard.

But not once did Rollo falter until, with the setting sun, he came to a bleak and windswept hill where stood a sorry hut. This dwelling was the meanest of the mean; fashioned of logs with naught but sod to make a roof.

The Viking churchman stood before the door and set his great cross down. He called, "All hail to you within! Rollo of Ellenstein seeks food and a place to lay his head."

He had been watched for a long time in his journey up the hill, and now the dwellers in the hut peered forth. A voice, all whine and snarl did beg: "Go on your way, oh huge one! We are poor. And nothing we have to tempt your appetite. Our board is bare. Our son a cripple—our daughter skinny and unbeautiful. Please leave us in our misery and our want."

Rollo, unruffled, sat himself cross-legged down before the hut. "I pity you for a crippled son, but I do not seek a slave. Your daughter may be thin and hideous, but she has beauty if her heart is pure. And if your food is gone—then come forth to sit here and share mine."

Rollo took from the sack around his waist a giant loaf of bread. He broke it and the malty odor rode the wind into the hut.

"Come forth, I say. I would not sup

ROLLO, ON leaving Ellenstein, walked eastward toward the

alone. I want company."

Cringing and filled with fear they came from in the hut. A frightened man and wife; a frightened son; a daughter pale and broken from disease, her eyes upon the bread.

Rollo broke the loaf and held forth pieces which they snatched. With timid sounds, they stretched their mouths and ate as though they had not broken fast for days. They finished up their bread and picked the fallen flakes up from the ground to eat them also.

AND THEN the husband looked upon the cross. He fingered it, each motion filled with fear. But wonder overcame his fright, and he said, "A strange weapon I have never seen."

Rollo said, "No, my friend. Not strange. Have you never seen a cross before?"

The great-eyed girl spoke up: "There was a time I mind—two snows ago—when a man with a shaven head came by our hut. He had a cross but it was small and made of wood."

"He told you not about his God?"

"Nay. Close on his heels came Vandals filled with wrath. The shaven man went on across the hills. The Vandals stopped to burn our hut. They took our food and left my brother here for dead."

The brother, his fear allayed, picked up a crumb, grinned as he ate it, said, "A stupid lot. We had three hens. Each day they laid three eggs—rare hens indeed. The Vandals killed them all and ate their flesh."

The father spoke: "Your name, huge traveler? Your name and mission here in this bitter land where no man's life or goods is safe?"

"I told you—Rollo of Ellenstein. My mission lies on ahead."

The husband's eyes strayed to the cross. "You come without a guard,

and Vandals near. They'd slay you in a trice and take your cross. Such golden treasure will not go far across these hills."

"The Vandals keep you poor?"

"They sweep across these hills like an evil scourge; as constant as the winds in their attentions. Let a man save one loaf of bread, one bag of grain and lo! they tear away the hinges on his door."

Rollo's eyes swept up the hill and down as though gauging the extent and worth of the country. "You have neighbors? There are many of you here?"

"A goodly number when gathered once together in a place. But like the timid field mice, they scatter out and make themselves unseen."

Rollo got to his feet with decision. "Call them together," he said. "Tell them a servant of the Christ is here and would speak to them. Tell them that Rollo of Ellenstein brings hope and love and has great words to speak."

He slept on the bleak hill that night and the following day they came—slowly at first, with timid, faltering footsteps. Then, fascinated by the great golden cross and the man in strange robes who carried it so easily and without fear, they gathered close and listened to his words.

He told them of Jesus, of his life and times; spoke of the mighty force He held in His gentle hands. He told them of the new law this Man brought—not to kill but to help—not to steal but to give. He spoke 'til the sun was high and told each man to take his wife and children to Ellenstein where there would be food for all.

THEN, AS the sun reached its highest point, the Vandals came; over the crest of the hill in a screaming wave, down on the kneeling throng.

With a Viking roar of old, Rollo turned to face them, weaponless, save for the cross he bore. He lifted the cross. "The Church Militant!" he belated, and using the great cross as a scythe, he mowed the Vandal men and horses down like an outraged reaper deep in a field of corn.

He tore great holes in the sweeping charge and the Vandals all fell back—as much from wide-eyed consternation as from the bone-crushing slaughter in their ranks. Never before had they seen a warrior such as this—clad in fine robes, crowned with a mitre, swinging the strangest weapon any man had ever seen.

The trembling natives had fallen back like wind-swept leaves before the Vandal ranks had felt the crushing blows of Rollo's cross. Now they stopped to watch the chilling sight. The broken Vandal bodies strewn about the ground. Fierce warriors squalling in pain, whimpering, dragging broken limbs along the grass.

The natives did not run, but they did not advance. They stood and stared.

Now the Vandals formed again and moved with a surer hand into the fray. They centered their force on Rollo and again his great cross swung its deadly arc. But there were many Vandals, and in time they bore him down.

As he fell, Rollo prayed, seeing the natives trembling as they watched, yet not retreating. "Lord, give them the courage they have needed long. Let them realize this barbarous horde is not invincible—that valiant men alone can save their wives and families."

But, as a Vandal saber laid across Rollo's skull, the natives had not moved. Rollo went down, seizing a Vandal chief to slay, even as he fell before the horde.

Book 3

The Ants of Wall

ROLF WAS sore bewildered and distressed. Slowly he walked down the ramp of the Martian ship and back to the waiting group by the river's edge. The strangeness of this affair was in his mind; uncertainty of what he was to do.

When first the ship he'd sighted around the bend, after the craven Martian man had fled, there had been only sureness in his plan. The ship and the evil god. Enter the ship; slay the god; fulfill the orders he'd been given in his dream.

They had approached, the four, warily, down the river toward the ship. Then Rolf held up his hand. "Stay here," he said, "and wait. This is my mission, mine alone. I'll open that devil's box and do the deed though all the hordes of darkness bar my way."

Alone he advanced, sword held in readiness. Wondering, he looked into the huge, black jet tubes that had hurled the ship like flame across the void. This, Rolf mused, must be where the fiery tail comes out. He sought to enter there. His way was barred by soot-caked grates through which he could not pass.

He quit the nether end and circled round the ship and climbed the ramp. The port was closed. He sought to pry it loose with his fighting blade, but so hard was the metal that he scarce made a scratch upon the surface of the plate.

Now he stood back and smote the space ship hard. The pounding echoed up against the hills and Rolf's voice thundered out: "Come forth! Come forth and face the fighting sword of Rolf. This day will mark your doom. This day your blood—O evil god—if

blood you have—will spout like fountains from a dozen wounds. Come forth!”

Nothing occurred, and Rolf looked back to where his allies stood upon the grass. Lars with his blade unsheathed, poised to come charging down upon the ship. The Nubian, Tazor, frowning as in doubt, the sunlight shining on his great black bulk. Jorgen, a patient warhorse waiting there for words to send him into life or death. Again Rolf beat upon the port.

Slowly it opened, pushed outward from within, its mighty hinges silent as a grave. Rolf crouched, his sword held tight, poised to cut down the first emerging thing.

But the sword was never raised; the thrust not made. The blade dropped down to hang from Rolf's lax hand. Also his very jaw went lax at sight of what stood there within the door.

A WOMAN—nay, a girl—in scarlet robes; a creature not of evil, but of good. For truly, if this beautiful queen was foul, then nothing was left there that could be good. The grass, the moon, the sun, were loathsome things, if evil lay beneath that scarlet robe.

She had such beauty as he'd never seen. No blemish marked the smooth and rounded limbs. Her hips were slim as starlight and her breasts had such exquisite contour as to set men raving for the touch of them. Her face, a dream of perfect symmetry, full-red her lips, teeth even and white as snow. And purity of soul lay in her eyes, reflecting out great innocence, great good.

Rolf said, "Where is the evil god who holds you here?"

"My name is Lall," she replied, smiling, while she looked him over slowly, her eyes traveling upward past his thong-laced legs; hovering there

above; then, taking in the span of his shoulders, Lall thought of the great crushing power of those arms. "I am a stranger from another world, hoping to find a welcome here."

"You came alone?"

A languorous wave of her hand indicated her Martian husbands clustered behind her. "Practically alone," she said. She turned to the Martians. "Go about your affairs."

"Yes, Lall," and they scurried away into the bowels of the ship.

Lall stepped back, smiling. "Won't you come in? Perhaps I can show you things you have never seen before."

Rolf considered this. He frowned and glanced again at the three who awaited him. Then he shrugged and followed Lall into the Martian ship and stood in wonder at the things he saw.

And finally they came to Lall's personal chambers. Strange and heady were the perfumes that smote Rolf's nostrils as he followed the ant queen into the rose-draped place. Lall appeared wearied. She stretched her gorgeous body out upon a pastel-shaded lounge. Her arms went out gracefully toward Rolf in a motion that could have been either invitation or a sign of languorous fatigue.

The Viking stood watching her, his bewilderment decreasing not one whit. "You came alone in this metal sky dragon—alone to this world, clear across all the heavens above?"

Lall smiled.

"That I cannot understand. You would need a crew of slaves to make the ship ride true. There would be duties to be done."

"One man who knows his art can guide this cruiser. It is run by instruments, by machinery. It needs only the pilot and the other four to do very simple tasks."

Rolf shook his head. "I feel it could not be done by so few, unless

you are truly a goddess. You do not look like one and Tazor the Nubian said you would probably be mortal. Tell me, are you mortal or a goddess?"

"I am mortal." She held out an arm toward him, then arose from her couch and came close. "Feel me," she invited. "Put your hands upon my body and you will discover it is not made of ethereal stuff."

Rolf laid his great hands upon her shoulder and she moved closer, as though from their pressure even when there was no pressure, until she was against him. Then she reached up her hands and drew his head down and kissed him. It was a sensual kiss. Laughing now, she stepped back. "Did that seem the cold kiss of a goddess?"

ROLF HAD no answer on his tongue, and as Lall looked at him, she had a wonder of her own. This huge, magnificent clod, from his own words, did not appear to have arrived by chance. He spoke as one who was at the end of a search, and mouthed words about mortals and goddesses.

Then who had sent him? That superbrain Lork, who lived in a tower back on the planet now stripped? Both he and his student, Pralt, were known to have tremendous telepathic powers. But granted that in their last moments they'd gotten knowledge of her contemplated destination and had sent mental pictures through the void—who on this backward planet had the skill to receive them from so far?

Lall put a carefully guileless light in her eyes and asked, "You seem to come as one on a mission, handsome giant—"

But she got no further as a great suspicion dawned on Rolf. "Hark to this, mortal, goddess, or whatever you may be—I speak as I have always spoken, and you answer me. Even in

this one world there are many tongues, and often one man knows not another's meaning. Yet you answer me in my own tongue though you are from a star. Only a goddess could do this." The suspicion within him had heightened, and Lall had a qualm of fear.

"That is only as it appears to you," she said. "I speak the universal language of your thoughts and mine. It may be hard for you to understand just how it's done, but I am sending thoughts to you, after reading in your mind the thoughts you put into words. Your mind interprets my replies in the only way it knows, putting them first into your own native words so they may register."

"That I do not understand, except you say you can read my thoughts." He leaned forward in quick triumph as though he had already scored a point. "If that is your ability, why do you question me for why I came? Why do you not read this in my mind?"

"I cannot reach into your memory. In order to read your thoughts, I must first ask you to bring them forth. If you but think the answers, I will know."

"I'll tell the answers," Rolf replied. "I was sent here through the powers of the witch Hangra; I saw this ship approach the world. And clear my orders came: Go forth and meet the ship. Therein resides an evil god who must be slain."

Lall's fear deepened into chill. The superbrain! Or Pralt, or one of the other students in the tower. They were all dead but they had gotten in a telling blow. Lall's hand trembled at sight of Rolf's fingers closing over the jewelled guard of his great blade. Still, she felt she could handle this naive and simple minded giant if the entire truth had not been told.

SWIFTLY SHE searched his mind to discover if he knew how to cope with her ants. Possibly even the superbain had not known this secret—the knowledge of how to guard one's self from their ravenous jaws. In Rolf's mind, Lall found no inkling that the knowledge lay buried there. In fact, she could find even no image of her dreadful children. Rolf, it seemed, did not know of the scourge that had depopulated her planet.

Lall smiled and breathed more easily. After all, her fears had been unfounded. If the superbain had known the secret, he and his students would not have died so horribly.

"No doubt," she said, "your message was authentic, but it could have become mixed in the sending. It could have been misinterpreted by this Hanga of whom you speak. It is so easy to mistake good for evil. A slight misconception can unjustly brand the deserving as ravenous beasts. Look at me," she said, spreading forth her arms. "Do you trust your senses? If so, do I look evil to you?"

Rolf, sore puzzled, shook his head. "Never in all my time have I seen such beauty—such obvious purity—a heart so clean reflected in two eyes. Tazor, the Nubian, said it could be so—that good could be wrongly adjudged as evil."

"This Tazor. He must be a man of mighty mind. Twice you have spoken of him. Who is he?"

"He is a black man who has always been a slave. But his wisdom is beyond any I have known. He speaks with a level tongue and has watched and listened many years."

"A black man. But you are fair. Tell me—are the men of this planet vari-colored?"

"There are yellow men who come with sword and flame from the east. There are black men who mainly serve as slaves. And the white men

who overshadow all the rest in skill and courage."

With the need for fear allayed, Lall's own urgent desires, the hot demands of her very nature came to the fore. Again her arms slid over Rolf's shoulders, and her rosebud lips were tilted toward his own.

"A certain white man stirs my blood," she said. "And I could stir within him such fires of love as he has never dreamed."

Rolf drew back from her. "A man would be of stone if his blood did not heat at sight of you. But I am pledged. I've taken me a wife who's yet a virgin waiting in the north. My vows stand like a wall before me now."

Lall stepped back laughing. She smiled up at him like a gorgeous imp. "What are you going to do with me?"

"I do not know. I must seek counsel with Tazor and Lars."

"I will not go away."

Rolf turned toward the exit of the ship. Lall's word held him. "A thought. Why not send to me this Tazor in whom you put such trust? I will talk to him as I have talked to you and he can judge."

"That will be done," Rolf said, and left the perfume of her presence, deep in thought.

ALONE, LALL spent some time also in deep thought. After a while, she stepped to the window and looked out, her eyes calculating as she surveyed Rolf's waiting friends. She pursed her luscious lips and stood with one sharp fingernail tapping her milk-white teeth. Then, as though having made a decision, she went to the door and opened it.

They waited there, her five Martian husbands, and they smiled up at her as one. "I have need of you," she said.

"Yes, Lall."

Or rather—was her unspoken thought—my need for you is over.

"Come one at a time at the usual interval."

"Yes, Lall."

The first husband followed Lall into her cabin and stood waiting. She turned and smiled at him; came close and put her arms around him. He was small, remindful of a child standing against her warm beauty. She felt his trembling body and there was contempt in her face.

This he did not see because, when he raised his eyes, she was smiling again. Gently, she elevated his head and lowered her own while he stood in sweet anticipation of the kiss to come.

It was the kiss of death.

Her beautiful lips opened as they approached his throat and the white teeth were revealed in all their terrible sharpness. They settled against the flesh of his throat, gently at first, as though to make betrayal the more agonizing.

Then they slashed in and through, meeting deep under the veins that carried his life-blood. At the same moment one of her arms held his small body helpless while her other hand stifled his scream. Soon he ceased struggling and she lowered him away from her body.

As she looked down at him the savage joy within her welled up into her eyes and they were not beautiful, but held the cold ferocity of a soulless insect.

One by one she slew her husbands until they were a pile of prospective carrion behind the bed. Then, when it was over, she suffered the exhaustion that was sure to come from such violent pleasure of the emotions. She sank down upon her lounge and lay still, and in a few minutes all her beauty came back until she looked for all the world like a girl weary of

doing good for others.

It occurred to her as she lay thus that she had cut off her escape from this new planet. Her pilot was dead—the second in the heap behind the bed. This, however, failed to disturb her greatly. Her mind was too full of tired ecstasy at having vented the cruelty which was a part of her nature.

Languidly, she glanced toward the bed. One tiny foot was in sight, bent at an odd angle. She would have to do something about those bodies, Lall thought. But not right away. Not this minute.

She lay with her mind full of the four giants of this new planet. She thrilled from thinking of what lay ahead.

SO ROLF was sore bewildered as he left the alien ship. He crossed the intervening space to the three who awaited him and Lars spoke up.

"I see no blood upon your blade. But I saw the comely wench who greeted you. She seemed out of place among the evil ones that ride that ship."

Rolf sank to the ground with his legs crossed. This was a signal for the rest to do the same. They sat in council thus and Rolf scowled hard.

"It looks, Tazor, as though your words were wise. I fear the source of my orders gotten in the dream was controlled by jokers, liars, or other evil ones. Were I to slay that girl, I could not face the wife who waits for me."

Lars looked ruefully at his worn boots and leggings. "You're telling us we walked an idiot's road? That now we've come these weary leagues, there's no one here to slay?"

"This girl has with her several of the stunted creatures such as him we collared near the bend. And no one else."

"I could have stayed at home," Lars growled, "stamped on a dozen sand crabs, and rated myself as highly as coming here to snap the life from those small monstrosities."

Tazor had not spoken. He sat quietly as though waiting for a definite word from Rolf. The Viking leader said, "Why don't you go as I went, Nubian—into the ship—and speak with this red-gowned lass? With your great knowledge, your experience, some word or sign might clear the clouded way."

"That is your wish?"

"It is my wish, but not an order, friend. At times you seem to slip back into other days and rate yourself a slave."

The Nubian arose. "Though I am free, your wish, and any wish of those I love, will send me even to the gates of hell."

"Well spoken, black man," Lars commended him, "and here's a wish from me: Inquire of the lass if in her ship she has by chance a piece of northern cheese. As things now stand, I'd kill ten men for just one whiff of mouldy *Ballocraz*."

TAZOR MOVED slowly from the group and turned his footsteps toward the ship. He went with leisured pace and when he came abreast of it, he stopped.

He laid a hand upon the hull that pierced the depths of void. Leaning close, he studied it with great intensity. He rubbed the surface with his hand, then drawing forth his sword, he beat upon the hull until the metal rang. Then he stood back and marvelled that not a mark or scratch appeared upon the hull.

Speaking softly, he said, "The men who made that metal stand supreme above the finest mind this world has ever spawned. The world from whence this space craft came must be a won-

drous world indeed. My mind cannot conceive its splendor and its wealth."

He circled the ship and stood before the great jet-tubes. He rubbed a finger on their inner surfaces and studied hard the residue that clung. Shaking his head, he rubbed the finger clean upon his belt and sought the space ship's ramp.

The girl stood waiting for him there and—as Rolf had looked—he looked at her. But through far different eyes.

Tazor appraised her differently than Rolf. He granted her the beauty that he saw, but the Nubian had gazed on female charms in more ports and places than all his three companions in a group. He'd seen the vast slave markets in the great cities set like jewels on the shores of the Southern Sea. He'd watched them come in chains and stand upon the block, naked like cattle, for all men to see. He'd heard their charms extolled by bearded auctioneers, even to pitiful details of their skill at pleasing any master whom they served.

And Tazor could not look on beauty now with any reaction save pity for the favored one. For long he'd heard it said: Happy the ugly wench who works the fields and scrubs the bricks rather than serve dark-faced lustful men.

So Lall's lush body was lost on him as he came to the top of the ramp and bowed. "I come to speak with you," he said. "That I may give good counsel to my friend who seeks to know which path his feet must tread."

"Enter," Lall said. "And I can only hope for your intercession with him. I wouldn't care to be killed by mistake. I am utterly defenseless and at your mercy."

TAZOR WENT as Rolf had gone, into the cabin of the Martian girl. But there were no bodies strewn behind the bed. And subtle, rare per-

fume lay on the air.

Tazor tested this. He had never known its like before. He looked about the cabin while Lall sat down demurely on the lounge.

"I feel your sense and wisdom are far greater, my lord, than that of the yellow haired giant."

"I am not your lord and the wisdom of my friend is not to be discussed. The point is whether you shall live or die."

"What manner of place is this." Lall cried, "where a defenseless woman is slain on suspicion? Is there no justice here?"

"Very little. But we will do our best to find some in this case."

"You don't question my ability to speak with you," Lall said. "Is this because it does not seem strange to you?"

"It is not difficult to see that you speak with your mind more so than with your lips. The process is known among the wise men of this world."

Lall was ill at ease. This black man had an agility of mind that caused concern. She felt the power of his eyes as they bored into her own. Yet, she told herself, he was a man. And as such was subject to her charms.

She arose and approached him with humility. She knelt before him feeling—from her instinct—that this approach was best. "I put myself upon your mercy," she whispered. "I have come from a far-off place with only good will in my heart. Would you see me slain?"

Tazor made no move to touch her. She extended a timid hand to lay upon his knee. He ignored it.

"You come from among the stars." Tazor said. "Why? Were you exiled?"

"I came of my own free will."

"Fleeing, perhaps, from some crime committed?"

Lall felt a chill upon her spine. "No, my lord." Then she came to her feet

and stood before him. "Am I not beautiful? Pleasing to your eyes?"

"The point is not in dispute."

FROWNING SLIGHTLY, Tazor examined her with his eyes. They slid slowly downward from her face while the frown deepened. He studied her breasts, her slim waist, her hips and thighs and legs. He came also to his feet and his hands were upon her while she felt a sudden thrill of hope.

But this soon changed to troubled wonder as he stopped his search and stepped away.

"There is something that eludes me," Tazor said. "Something I cannot grasp. You are like all other women I have known—yet different. I cannot name the difference, yet within me I am sure it is not small."

He walked away, then turned suddenly and asked, "How are you different, wench?"

Lall sobbed as she lowered her head—sobbed like a beaten child, and said, "I am not different from the rest. Why do you think I am? I breathe—I live—I love. Is there no kindness in you, black man?"

"Far more, I think, than you will find elsewhere. But this is not a time for kindness, maid. This is a time for knowledge, and instinct. Yet both now do me ill. You're different, yet I cannot say just how."

Lall was no longer frightened. She felt she had passed the crisis in this interview. She knew full well this Nubian would never lie within her bed. But that was not too great a loss, she thought. In one of the yellow-heads she'd find a mate.

But she wanted to get away from his keen brain, his brilliant eyes. Again she sobbed and stood with lowered head. "I tire now. Please go and carry whatever counsel you will to your friend. If I must die, so be it. But now I would rest."

Heavy with thought, the Nubian went out; and down the ramp and back across the grass. They waited as before, both Rolf and Lars alert to hear the first words Tazor spoke.

But Jorgen seemed a thousand miles away within his mind. His eyes were on the ship, and he scarce heard Rolf's growling words: "I'm waiting, black man—speak."

The Nubian said, "I feel that I have failed you. There is little I can say. I saw the wench and looked into her eyes. I questioned her and sought to probe her soul but I could not. She has the breath of purity—and yet..."

"Yet what?"

"I sense an evil there so thick and black that hell's dark corridors would shrink away from contact with it."

LARS GOT to his feet and drew his blade. "All this deep talk is quite beyond my simple nature. I say kill the wench. If not that, I will stalk those forests there and bring back food. Or could we take food from the wench?"

Tazor shook his head. "I'd vote against that move. I'd not care to fill my stomach with what I sense within that ship."

Lars snorted. "It's old women we've become. Four strong men squatting here debating whether we should kill a maid. We've all developed softness in the guts. Perhaps a little meat is what we need."

Tazor did not appear to have heard him. The black man was weighted down with a vast problem. "I feel that something happened there while I talked with her. Something that told me what I wished to know. Yet I was far too thick of skull to see."

Both Rolf and Tazor watched idly as Lars went striding into the forest.

"It keeps eluding me," Tazor went on. "I must relive the scene and find

the flaw."

"And I would walk away to be alone," Rolf said. "I'm wearied sore—my spirits deep and dark. What fools we be, Tazor, you and I. While we sit out here pulling on our beards, the maid, if she be evil, will charge the fires in her ship and fly away."

Tazor shook his head. "She will not leave. The maiden fears us not. She welcomed us and seeks something that we have. But I know not what. Let's wrestle with our problem through the night and see what sunrise brings. The maiden will not leave."

Rolf got to his feet and moved off toward the river. Tazor sat motionless as did Jorgen, and the sun sank in the west.

Then Lars came striding forth from the trees with a great shout and a buck across his shoulders. As darkness fell, a fire roared upon the shore and the Vikings ate.

LATER, THE fire fell to glowing embers and they lay as though in sleep. But Rolf slept not 'til hours had passed, and it was thus with Tazor. "There was something," he kept muttering, "something to prove the feeling in my heart."

Soon the measured snoring of the unburdened Lars found companionship in the even tones of the sleeping Rolf and Tazor. Of the four, only Jorgen remained awake.

Now he arose softly and moved like a huge shadow toward the space ship.

JORGEN'S MIND was such as to move always in one channel. Never was there more than a single thought held therein at a single time. Never more than one course of direct action. As he approached the ship, the thought flaming in his mind was of Lall. He had seen her standing twice in the ship's entrance when she'd waited for Rolf and Tazor to come up

the ramp, and her beauty smote him like a blow.

In the wanderings of the Vikings through the Southern Sea, Jorgen had never been one to carouse and wench for the sake of filling idle time. Many a southern beauty he'd passed up with scarce a look because no spark was kindled within him. But when one struck his fancy, he moved upon her with a singleness of purpose that was terrible in its finality.

Thus he moved now, up the ramp of the space ship to beat a fist on the metal door. There was no response and he beat once again. Slowly the panel moved inward and in the frame of strange illumination from within, stood Lall.

Jorgen spoke no words. He stepped through the doorway, lowering his huge head to get inside. He spoke no word, but his demand was in his face and in his eyes. The maid took a backward step, unhurried, and he followed on as she—also silent—took another step and another.

It did not occur to Jorgen that he was being led. Nor did he think to notice what her reactions were. He cared not a whit for anything but the fact that she was slim and desirable and beautiful and that she'd struck a spark from the hard core of his being.

They went through another door now and there was no fear on the maiden's face. And even Jorgen had the grace to be surprised when finally she smiled and held forth her arms.

To Jorgen, whirled along on the crest of man's most elemental task, there were only conscious highlights in his mind. The knowledge that here indeed was a worthy foe in the eternal battle between man and woman. Her slimness was a deception for she rode up to him with all the ardor of one bathed in the same fire that consumed the huge Viking.

Here was no shrinking lily—unless

perhaps a tiger lily with a fierce desire to meet his own. She sought no gentleness and even mighty Jorgen was amazed at the ferocity with which she met his own—to blend it all in one ferocity that mixed and melted in together to be one.

When it was done, Jorgen felt with dull wonder, an exhaustion he had never known before. It was as though a portion of his life sap had been withdrawn from out his veins. He stumbled from the cabin without a backward look. He pushed his way from out the ship and down the ramp, returning again to his fellows where he dropped upon the sod and closed his eyes. As he drifted into sleep, a sweet and warming thought was in his mind—a memory: She was a worthy wench. A worthy wench indeed.

THE VIKINGS and the Nubian arose at dawn to eat again. They took the cold meat in their hands and tore it with their teeth.

And it was now that Tazor stopped with suddenness and smote his thigh. "I know," he said. "I know at last. God sell me to the devil for a fool! All night I sought the key that was before my eyes and I saw it not."

Rolf put his own food down. "What do you know?"

"That she is evil—that the maiden must be slain. The voice that spoke to you was filled with truth. A scourge of some variety now sits upon our world. She must be slain."

Lars snorted as he went on with his breakfast. There was no occasion important enough to make him lose his interest in his food. "At least someone is finally sure of something around here. That's indeed a novel situation. But tell me—how did you arrive at your conclusion?"

"When I talked to the maid I spoke some bitter words and her body was torn by sobs."

"She wept?"

"No. That was it. She did not weep. Her eyes were dry and yet she made the motions showing grief. No tears came to her eyes and that's the key. The maiden cannot cry! Therefore, she is not human. She is evil and must die."

"This is conclusive?" Rolf asked.

"Beyond all doubt. The devil never cries. The evil are incapable of tears."

Rolf came to his feet with a lunge and bared his blade. "Then I can do this thing and get it done. It will take but a moment, then we start immediately back to the northland, back to my waiting bride."

He strode toward the ship with purpose etched in every bone and muscle of his build. He climbed the ramp and the flat of his sword rang loud upon the metal.

"Come out, evil goddess! Open the panel, Lall or whatever it was some foul mother named you. You've reached the end. But death that's short and painless is a gift when death becomes the order of the day. Come out!"

There was no response. The door remained closed while Rolf's sword rang again upon its surface. The other Vikings and the Nubian came up and Lars spoke out: "I call that rather dunderheaded, friend. Devil or god—evil or good—the nature's still the same. And few will step forth lamb-like at an invitation to their own death. I'd rate the maid a fool if she opened now."

ROLF'S EYES were blazing with righteous and fanatical anger. "One does not cavil or deceive in dealing with foul things! One speaks the word of truth to shame the lie. Now that she has not come, I'll take this ship asunder piece by piece. I'll drag her forth."

Lars stood with hands on his hips

surveying the hull. "You may be strong," he said. "The mightiest in all the northland, but I'll vow you've met your match."

Rolf hurled himself against the door, only to be hurled backward like a straw. He advanced again, roaring a Viking oath, but the door to the ship fit snugly in the hull and there was not an opening into which even a needle could be thrust.

In monumental rage, Rolf leaped upon the ground and tore the ramp itself from off its mooring. He slammed the metal slab against the hull with a sound that could be heard a mile around. But no impression did he make upon the hull. Not so much as a tiny mark to show where he had laid the metal on.

He turned and threw the ramp away from him, doubled his mighty fists and shook them at the sky. "I have not failed," he roared. "By Tor, I have not failed! I'll have her out though hell stands in my path!"

As Rolf spoke, Lall came to the window of the ship and looked out at them. It was a strange look as though Lall had been far away and had no idea what was transpiring. Her face was not now beautiful with youth, but drawn and worn as from a long and bitter period of labor, pain and woe.

She looked out at them and smiled and Tazor was sharply struck by her expression. "Could I be wrong?" he muttered to himself. "She looks for all the world like good itself. Like a mother—deep and wondrous eyes she has. Filled with compassion for all the helpless of the land. Could I be wrong?"

Rolf waved his sword aloft and shouted judgement on her head. But her manner was as one who had been given gentle greetings by a friend. She smiled and withdrew. And the smile was like a benediction, blessing all.

Tazor saw and marveled but, to mock his conscious mind, there came a coldness in his loins to rise and spread like unseen reptiles crawling over him. He shuddered, and beneath the warming sun the sweat upon his brow was cold as ice.

* Rolf had gone to the rear of the ship and was tearing with maniacal rage at the grates in the jet-tubes. But the grates held firm and it dawned with sharpest clarity on Rolf that the Martian known as Lall was tight and safe within her metal walls; that he was like a bug with broken wings assaulting the Alexandrian gates.

He fell to one knee, drooping, dejected, then came erect again. "All is not lost! If I cannot enter in and slay the witch, I'll slay her from without!"

HE RAN forthwith to the timbered line and returned at a killing pace, dragging behind him a tree that would have taxed the strength of five men.

Tazor and Lars stood back and watched. "He means to burn her out—to roast her alive," Lars said.

"Aye," the Nubian returned.

"But will she not escape? Will she not set those rosy tails a-flaming and ride them off into the sky?"

Tazor scowled and studied the terrain. "I have a feeling she cannot. I hadn't thought of it before, but I feel that she is trapped upon the ground. I doubt if even that great ship can tilt upon its tail and go straight up. It would surely need some room to get its speed—like the great web-footed birds I've seen in southern swamplands. I doubt the ship has room to rise again."

Now Rolf, with untiring energy, had heaped great logs of wood about the ship until it seemed to sit like some huge sacrifice upon a funeral pyre.

The sun was lowering when he had

finished with his self-appointed task. He stood back and called to Jorgen: "Bring an ember here. Bring fire—that we may see a devil roast!"

Some minutes later, the first flames crackled as the fire came alive, to brighten and set its teeth into the waiting wood. The Vikings and the Nubian stood back and saw the flames grow strong and leap about the ship and give the coming night a crimson gown.

The licking fingers crawled about the ship to leap higher and higher until they reached the level of the windows up above. And as they watched, the face of Lall appeared once more. Lit by the outside flames, it was a face of arresting beauty once again. Gone was the pain and vestiges of sorrow in her eyes. She looked with childlike curiosity upon the fire leaping at the ship.

And then she laughed.

But not with any spite; more a laugh of happiness and wonder at it all. Then the merriment was gone and she turned away from the window to be seen no more that night.

But Rolf, with superhuman energy, kept feeding up the flames all through the night. Asking no aid he worked as one possessed; worked as the only man upon the earth, ignoring all the others in his dogged energies.

All night he kept the flames alive and leaping high. No more was Lall's face seen, the windows blank with that odd glow of light created in the ship.

WITH DAWN, Rolf gave off laboring and let the fires die. He said to his companions, "She must have met her fate. Preferring to die inside, rather than come forth and taste the justice of my sword."

Lars said nothing. Only the Nubian had a word: "That would take will power far beyond the average mortal

man. The agony of dying from slow heat would drive the bravest out."

They watched the flames smoke and die and the hull of the flying ship was black from soot and ashes all around. Now they advanced, and Tazor laid his hand upon the hull.

"It is not even warm," he said. "I thought as much. A metal able to withstand the heat and cold of space, would hardly suffer from our poor attempts."

He brought his hand away and on it was the soot-ash. Where his flesh had touched, the metal of the ship showed bright and cool and unmarred as before.

At that moment they looked upward, their eyes caught by movement in the window. Lall looked, slanting her eyes downward the better to see them.

Again she had changed. She was brighter, harder, more brittle. The beauty in her face was the beauty of a fine art piece moulded in precious metal by a genius cold of blood and without a soul.

I can see it now, Tazor thought. The evil in her. Never a face so fair to serve as mask before a heart so black. We waited, in our justice, far too long. It was this justice that defeated us.

Rolf raised a giant fist. "Come out, you devil's thing! Come out and go back to your evil father with one clean thing about you—the thrust of a two-edged sword straight through your heart."

"You make it sound so inviting," Lars said, "I'm sure she'll strain herself in getting to the ground."

Lall looked down upon them and she was not smiling now. Her eyes were full of such a hate as scarce two eyes could hold. Her lips drew back from teeth now turned to fangs by the grimace. Her hands came up, the fingers arched to claws, each with a

crimson nail of sharpest point. She spoke and though the space ship walls were thick, her words came clear—as thoughts—into their minds.

"Stare! Talk, and wave your arms, you two-legged carrion piles. It's well for you that being stupid you do not know your fate. My children have been born and now are growing up. More will be born, and more and more. Soon I'll see you as screaming, gibbering senseless things, alive only with pain. Lall's revenge will visit soon for the indignities you've heaped upon me. You have not long to wait."

With that she was gone and the warriors looked at one another. Lars was the first to speak: "I'd swear I heard the wench talking and yet those walls stand up to fire and are not harmed."

Tazor said, "If we could have but known before."

Rolf's face was dark. "I will not leave this place though I grow old. I'll not depart without my mission filled. Someday, somehow, she must come out. I will be waiting here."

He turned and strode back to where the encampment had been made. Soon the other three followed and gloom hung heavy over them.

Came night, then followed by another day. Another day and night until a week had passed and Lars was sore distressed. "It's well and good to have a mission, Rolf. But you also have a wife who waits for you. Will you die here staring at that cursed ship?"

"My mission will be filled," Rolf answered doggedly.

Tazor seemed less affected than the rest. He wandered in the woods and seemed at home. He spent long hours communing with his thoughts and was content. Often he was wont to say, "I love this freedom," say it dreamily.

Jorgen remained the mute he'd always been. He stalked for game and set the rabbit snares. But now and

often he would stop to eye the ship with something in his face akin to pain. As though a sickness dwelt within his heart.

Then came a day they sat before their food when the Nubian looked up. He laid his deer haunch down and spoke as quietly as though but to commend the shining sun. "The door is opening," he said.

SLOWLY THE door of the space ship swung out away from the hull. It had been a long wait, and the four were held by surprise that this sudden change in things should come about.

They sat staring, all but Rolf. The Viking chief stared also, but he came unconsciously to his feet and drew his sword without knowledge of the act. But the necessary spark of command did not go from his brain to set his legs in action.

There was nothing to see at first, save the dark opening in the hull. They waited for sight of the lovely creature within, but she did not appear.

Then the spell was broken, and with a great shout, Rolf charged from the river's edge straight toward the ship. But only half the distance did he cover before he stopped again to stand as frozen as some Roman statue carved of stone.

From out the ship now came a sudden gush of stark insanity. It was as if the entrance had become the mouth of some obscene river.

Ants.

Ants by the dozens—hundreds—thousands spewing forth over each other, down the hull of the ship. But ants the like of which no mortal man had ever seen before. Fully a foot in length they were, and even from the river bank the three still-seated warriors saw them well. Six-legged, sized in body as a smallish dog, each ant

had a pair of vicious mandibles. These they snapped continually to make a sound like the snapping of bones; a sound that increased as the savage horde poured forth.

The Nubian crossed himself and moaned, "Great heaven what is this? An evil such as no man could conceive. She is a goddess, or a devil, or a fiend."

Lars said nothing. His mouth hung open and his eyes bulged out until it seemed a breath of air would knock them to the ground.

Jorgen sat like one who'd passed through hell.

At first, the ant horde seemed to come haphazardly from the ship. As in a sudden spasm of first-freedom, they poured in all directions on the ship and round about; turned the hull black with moving, twisting mass. They raised their heads as though to scent the wind and waking demons stretched within their eyes.

THEN, AS though from some unseen command; as from a word passed lightly on the wind—they stiffened. For a moment each was deathly still. The mass was frozen there upon the ship. But only for a moment; now it moved. The movement made the mass a complete and living thing with each ant just one cell of a monster hideous beyond all dreams.

One omnipresent brain was leading them—this point came clear—as they moved with great precision in an arc. One horn to left and one to right, they spread with amazing swiftness. And before his limbs became unfrozen, Rolf was trapped as were his three companions in an arc of moving rotteness, the river hard behind.

Rolf stood as they swept down upon him, rolling like a wave; the vanguard always going under as the ravenous rearward ants swept over them. With



The mass of hideous ants swept down upon the men with death-like precision

scarce a yard to separate him from the wave, Rolf raised his sword and slashed it through their mass. He slew a dozen of the insects, cleaving them asunder, but he could as well have slashed the naked wind.

Almost too late came Tazor's cry to break the spell: "Run, Viking, run! Retreat before you die!"

Rolf turned and fled back to the river's brink and found the Nubian had sprung to leadership.

"There is but one way—a chance," the Nubian said. "If we kill some, the rest may flee from us!"

Into each hand around him he thrust a burning brand from the cooking fire. "Move on them now," he cried, "before they move on us. Be careful lest you slip and fall. It would mean death."

Showing the way by his actions, he rammed with two burning brands to the brink of the moving wave. He thrust the brands into the rolling mass as one would thrust an oar into a wave. The dying insects screamed,

somehow, in rage. Or else the sound came from their roasting flesh. A stench rose up and the crest of the black ocean quivered and fell back.

Now the four warriors worked as one along a hard-held line. Thrusting their flaming torches among the insects.

But gladly they seemed to die; for each one that shriveled up and fell, there were two to eat the fried remains—gulp up with ravenous jaws the charred ant-flesh and jump forward toward the flame.

For a time the four held ground, killing the hideous insects by the scores. Then Rolf looked up to see fresh hordes of them pouring from the space-ship and he called, "This is futile. When our torches go, we go."

Tazor nodded in grim agreement. "Those jaws are poison. Let one touch you and you're done."

"My torches are almost out," Lars shouted. "It's time to sound retreat! Out to the island first in the river bed, then down the river! No man



can fight these things!"

THEY RETREATED from their war of fire on the ants and hastened to the shore. Then turned to see a deadly, chilling thing. The ants did not pursue. Instead, with diabolical intent, the two horns of the arc advanced in line—to the shore also—and arriving there flung out into the stream, committing suicide that others coming from behind, might use their bodies as a bridge to cross.

In horror stood the rooted warriors, frozen by the ingeniousness of this. "It's like a beast," Lars said in awe. "A single rotten beast with a single brain to guide the way, each ant a deadly part."

With amazing speed the foot-long killers moved across the bridge of bodies, thus to form a living bridge upon the dead and stand silently staring at their prey. It was as though they said, "Your fate is sealed, you will escape us not. Here by this river, ere the high sun sets, we'll have your skin, eyes, flesh, bones."

Now the center of the arc moved down along the shore; again the warriors fled; out through the knee deep water to the island in the middle of the stream. There they turned to watch and saw the ant-horde overrun the place they'd sat at food. Chilled to the heart by horror, were the Vikings and the Nubian, at sight of how the insects tore the meat. Covering it with their blackness; then the black hummock sank and disappeared as the meat went in the bellies of the ants.

Then came a sound fair sickening to hear. The crunching of the bones. For a moment now, the ants in circling swept away from the eating place and Tazor the Nubian shuddered as he spoke.

"Can I believe my eyes? Nothing—nothing is there that was lying there before. The food gone, not a scrap of flesh or bone in sight. Only clean sand. Food swept away so quickly the eye could hardly follow."

"And the knife," Rolf said in a

strangled voice.

"What knife?"

"The hunting blade that I left lying there. Did it escape your eye? The handle was of polished bone, and as the ants fell back, I saw the blade with but a metal haft. The handle made of bone was gone."

SO GREAT was their surprise, the warriors only stared and marveled in sick horror at the sight. They saw that whatever brain controlled the ant had decreed a rest. The insects made no move to drive on in. Instead, with a guard of thousands left to watch and wait, the balance moved away into the woods. Like a plague the like of which no mortal man had seen, they went about their work.

The sound of champing jaws was like the tramp of many horses on a hill. Soon great trees began to fall and over these the insects swarmed and the forest giants—leaf, branch and trunk and root, vanished into their maws to leave bare ground.

"Great God!" the Nubian whispered. "Not one single man should live to see this ghastliness on earth. It pounds upon the senses, assaults the gates of reason and is like to drive one mad. See how they eat! All things with any life at all quickly vanish on any spot they tread! A scourge like that could strip the earth right down to rock and soil!"

The three Vikings were gazing at the entrance to the ship, forth from which, still, the ants were vomited. But in a lesser volume now 'twas true.

"But where do they come from?" Rolf asked with hanging jaw. "What rotten miracle of evil brings them forth?"

"She spawns them," Tazor said, "Out of her body comes the awful eggs that make this possible. The scourge is here! If that wench does not die, the earth is doomed. The gods

who spoke you orders in your dream knew that this horror pended for the world."

"I failed them," Rolf replied. And in his words was a sign of mental agony which only death, it seemed, would finally still. "I failed in duty they did bide in me!"

At this, a strangled shout went up from Jorgen. The others turned and saw upon his face sheer madness brought about by self-contempt. "It was I!" he cried. "It was I who wore the traitor's cloak! I see it now. Hot was my blood for the wench, and in the dead of night I went into the ship and had my way with her. I took her in my arms to bring this on!"

With a terrible cry, he waved aloft his sword and charged across the shallow water toward the shore. Before his friends could move, he reached the wave of insects, struck in frenzy at it with his sword.

Now Lars and Rolf lunged forward to his aid, but only to be held in check by Tazor's arms and Tazor's voice: "It is too late! Stay! You can only sacrifice yourselves!"

AND THIS was true. The ants were over Jorgen with such viciousness, he was already down, a black and writhing mass from which one roar of agony arose before the end. Then, as before, the black mound grew smaller, seemed to sink into the ground, and it was gone.

Now did the Nubian prove himself the pillar of strength he really was. Both Rolf and Lars were on their knees, sick with the sight, and Tazor's strong hands on their shoulders so-laced them.

"Now is the time to prove a man's a man," he said. "Courage to stand against what we have seen is God's own strength. You must bear up."

Lars was shaken with sobs. "I am not craven, I've faced many a fight-

ing horde." Rolf sobbed, "And so have I. But this! The horror of it turns my bones to milk."

"Now is the time," the black man said, "when a man must have a God; one not of myth, but a mighty God of power toward Whom to raise his feeble arms."

Lars said, "Even great Tor himself would flee before this scourge."

Tazor was on his knees and in his eyes shone a light that was an exaltation of his heart. "There is a God. The one true Son of Him who sits above. A gentle savior preaching peace and yet, Who drove the scourges from the court with whips and told the sea to cease its bellowings. That God I turn to now."

And now a stirring came among the ants as Lall, within the ship, ordered them on anew because she tired of watching the stranded warriors and now thirsted for their final agonies. The ants moved as a body to the shore. The Vikings saw the wave move in from either river bank. Hurling their bodies out to drown and make a bridge across which living death could walk with ease.

Lars shrugged and forced again—though gray of face—his old, defiant grin. "Make haste with those prayers, friend," he said to Tazor, kneeling by. "Already I can feel the flesh ripped from my bones."

Now, half the placid river was a solid mass of ants. And the water strip around the isle was narrowing as the writhing insect circle pulled in like a noose.

"Commend yourself to Him," the Nubian replied. And in his eyes was only peace, not fear.

Rolf's eyes were on the ship; he gripped his sword. "If I ran full hard—faster than any man had ever run before—then I could make it. I could slay the witch!"

Lars smiled. "Your slaying days

are passed. You could not take five steps into that mass. You could not—" Lars stopped and stood there staring down along the river to its bank. He clawed an aimless hand at Rolf, found a shoulder, squeezed, and whispered: "Look!"

The Viking chieftain turned, his eyes directed by Lars' single word.

ALONG THE river bank marched the strangest figure they had ever seen or ever would again. A giant, yellowed-haired and broad of girth. A Viking truly, from the sight of him, but a Viking fully met with evil days.

His garments were in bloody rags and on his torso and his arms and legs were wounds in such a number they defied all count. His beard was caked and matted, yellow and red; his great chest rose and fell in labored breath.

But his head was high, step firm, his blue eyes clear. And in his hands he held a huge gold cross.

"It's Rollo," they breathed in unison. "Rollo we left in Gaul to take a wife!" Then, Tazor raised his eyes and crossed himself. "My miracle," he said, and bowed again in prayer.

The Bishop Viking out of Ellenstein stopped now to look about and see the sight before him; the ship, the ants, the men in the lessening circle tightly pressed. His nostrils flared and to his placid face there came a look of loathing.

Then the voice of Rolf, and Lars too, calling out, "Go back! Go back! We know not whence you came, but this is death! Leave quickly or this beast will smell you out!"

Rollo paid no heed. Raising his cross, his eyes flaming, he came on. Straight toward the insect ring in lengthened strides he made his way. Full into them he walked.

And the ants attacked him not. Instead, a wave of terror swept their ranks. Invisible, yet tangible it was, the feeling of their panic in the air. A subtle sound arose, of faint, feeble screaming in their ranks. Gone was the order, gone the deadly discipline. The brain had lost its power, and the ants, like frantic things, sought only their escape from something terrible that menaced them.

The outraged Rollo made of his golden cross a flail and beat them in his path while the Vikings stared in wonder from the isle.

And also Lall observed him from the ship. Sick in her heart she saw the Viking go, with swift precision out around the ants, to drive them up and down the river bed into the deeper waters where they drowned by thousands, sank down and were no more.

Lall sobbed. How had he known? Whence had come this man who knew that her ants were sensitive to the subtlest radic waves?

"How could he know," she sobbed, "that emanations from the purest metal—gold—would drive my ants insane with fear? And how could he have this gold? On the planet I destroyed, it was a sacred metal used only for images in the shrines! There, no man carried gold around with him. There was a law, and to violate it meant death. How came he with this gold?"

THUS DID she babble as her own fears rose to stifle her. She feared the death that faced her now. Feared it as her ants had feared the faint, pure aura sent out by the gold.

In a frenzy, Lall rushed to the control room, wishing now for the pilot husband she had slain. "Come back to me," she whined. "Come back and guide the ship."

Madly she pulled and hauled at switches and levers that were mys-

teries. "I will not die," she moaned. "I have this ship! A child could put it in the air!"

And the warriors, wading knee-deep through the carcasses of ants, saw the great ship shudder, saw the blasts go out from its jet, the fiery tails on which it rode. The ship lunged forward with a heat that seared the ground and melted rock. Then, arcing up, it hurtled toward the sky.

But not for long. Before their startled eyes, it quivered, stood upon its tail, and dived. Down through the sky and toward the mountain range nearby. Hard toward the vertical cliff of a snowy peak.

It hit in a blinding flash, and the sound went out for miles around; the sound of the ship and of the mountain falling down to cover it in a mighty wave of rock and earth that filled the valley, covering the ship forever, or until some future race could hollow out a mile of earth and rock to make a valley there.

LATER, AT rise of sun, there stood three Vikings and a Nubian by the stream. Their stories had been told. Rollo's in an exalted voice of how he'd found a land of beaten people on the way. How he had talked to them of God and how—when he himself was down before the Vandal horde, they'd bared their teeth and fought and had a victory. The word of God had come to make them great.

Then at his feet knelt Tazor with the sun bright on his ebony skin to beg, "Bless me this day, Father. Cleanse my soul and accept my services. Where you go, I will go. I am your shadow now and this day hence."

Rollo, his eyes on Rolf, held forth his hand. "And you, my friend—is your heart still for the northern gods—the shrinking gods who could not save you here?"

Rolf scowled. "I need no gods," he

said, and covered the uncertainty with-in by adding, "I am strong—stronger than you, friend Rollo. In the north, you tried to dry the Golden Horn and failed!"

Rollo smiled. "Yes, I failed. But I have gained strength since from Him. Here—lift you my cross!"

ROLF LAID hold of the giant golden symbol of the Man of Galilee. He lifted and a strange light came to his eyes. The great cross did not move. Rolf set himself again and strained until his veins stood out and his heart was fit to burst. He could as well have tried to tear a mountain from its roots. He could not lift the cross.

Rollo raised his hand in benediction and his eyes were misty. "Go," he said, "back to the cold north hills you love so well. Back to the bride who waits for you. I see as in a vision that a day will come and we will meet again. A day when you will lift this cross and walk. The day you see a glorious dawning light. Farewell."

They watched him go—the Nubian in his wake—and all was deathly still. Then Lars said, "It is lonesome here. The time has come to leave. This is a dismal place and our home is far away."

"Yes," said Rolf, slowly. "It is lonesome here—and our home is far away."

THE END

SHADOW-LAND OF DEATH

By
JON BARRY

THE borderland between life and death is not distinct and sharp; it is broad and hazy and nebulous. Modern surgical techniques seem to confirm this observation, a belief also held by the ancients. The most recent case concerned, as it often does, a major operation in which the patient's heart stopped.

The man was having an eye removed because of some infection. The operation proceeded very nicely for some time, when suddenly, with only the slightest warning, the patient's heart stopped! Momentarily the surgeon was disconcerted. He knew that apparently the major cause of death seems to be the degeneration of the brain tissues when the heart ceases to force oxygen-laden blood through them. But this doesn't occur for ten or fifteen minutes. Therefore, the surgeon has a certain minimum time in which he can act.

Without hesitation, the surgeon measured his chances. He slit the chest cavity outside the heart and abruptly thrust his hand in and manipulated the heart with flexures of the fingers! This took place less than four minutes after it had ceased beating. Continual massage was the technique, so for fourteen minutes the doctor alternately squeezed and relaxed the heart, until finally it caught "fire" once more and started beating of its own volition! It beat very feebly at first, so the surgeon

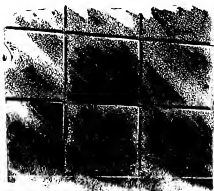
kept up the massage for another hour and a half. At the end of that time the heart was pounding away normally and the eye operation had been completed. The surgeon laced the cavity and the patient was none the worse for the wear. Incidentally, while the massage was proceeding the anesthetic had been quickly changed to oxygen.

That such an event could occur, and it has happened fairly frequently lately, is some indication of how broad the death-life dividing line is. So far as medicine can discern, the major criterion of death does seem to be degeneration of the brain tissues through lack of oxygen—when the heart stops. Provided something can be done before this process sets in, other physiological details seem of small moment.

It is not yet known so far as we can ascertain, whether or not any medical experiments have been conducted during operations, in which oscillographic and electronic observation of the body functions have been taken. It would seem that this might be a logical thing to do, this sensing of the feeble electric currents of the brain, or the equally feeble electronic nerve impulses. If a patient were so wired perhaps a surgeon could detect the danger signals more easily and perhaps also there is a chance that death actually manifests itself in some subtle electrical way. The new electronic anesthesia machine may have some value in this matter.

"YOU CAN'T SEE ME

By William F. Temple



HE FLOATED upwards out of the tangle of crazy dreams, and it was so warm and his couch was so soft that he thought it was morning and he was in bed. He lay there on his back, with his eyes shut, wondering how many minutes he had left to enjoy this almost pre-natal comfort before the rush for the bathroom and the subway began and there was no time for dreams nor ease.

Slowly he became aware that the murmuring of the traffic on the highway two blocks away was too regular, too rhythmic.

He opened his eyes, and despite the sun-spectacles, the day smote him with glare and dazzle.

Everything seemed to leap into focus at once. The dry, white sands, the murmuring gray-blue Atlantic, the beach guards sitting on their raised platforms, the picnic parties round the brick stoves, the promenade behind,



Everybody but Zechariah had a friend. Was it because he was too blind to see — or that he didn't keep his eyes closed long enough?



The whole world must have gone crazy. Now, here she was in a passionate embrace—with nobody!

the heads of far-off swimmers...

Sunday afternoon at Jones Beach.

Without turning, he reached out to grasp and press Livvy's hand. His fingers danced over the white sand as if it were too hot to touch, as, in fact, it very nearly was. But they did not meet Livvy's hand, nor any other part of her dainty person.

He sat up suddenly. The patch of sand on his right-hand side, where she always lay in relation to him on these familiar excursions, was empty save for a dried twist of seaweed. There was something suggestive of a human body about the seaweed, and the fantastic notion darted across his mind that Livvy, by some black magic, had been transformed into this small, brown shred.

The absurd thought was killed immediately by common sense and buried by the memory of Livvy saying, "No, Zechy, I'm always forgiving you, and I'm tired of it. It doesn't do any good. You don't improve—you don't even try to improve. Don't ever speak to me again. You're a nasty, bad-tempered brute—why, I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world."

"You couldn't, Livvy; there'd be no one to marry us," he said, trying to humor her. But she was on her dignity.

"My name's Olivia. Please remember that."

"What's the use—if I'm not to speak to you again?"

She tossed her head.

"You do that beautifully," he said, humbly. "Just like Bette Davis."

"That's what I mean, Zechy. You're so—so cynical. And sarcastic. I never know where I am with you. I can never feel sure that you're not poking fun at me behind my back."

He said stiffly, "I am not cynical. I love you. My name's Zechariah—please remember that. As for poking

fun at you behind your back, this whole silly attitude on your part started with my ribbing you before your very eyes, so to speak. I merely said, in tones of light levity, 'Livvy, either your slip is showing or else I'm not up to date with the fashions.'"

"Right in front of my boss!" she flashed, "You humiliated me. I can never trust you any more."

"You can always trust me to let you down. Like your slip."

"Oh, you funny man! Why don't you go and marry Fred Allen?—you'd make a happy pair. One thing is certain: you're never going to marry *me*. Good-bye."

And she had walked away.

He had called after her, "See you at the beach Sunday."

"You will not."

And he had not.

THERE WERE thousands of people on the beach, and yet he was alone. He had come here a score of times before, but never without Livvy. Darn the girl and her silly pride! Could she never try to understand him? He had known her since she was a child, had been engaged to her for two years. How long did you have to go around with people before they got to find out what kind of a guy you were?

Sure he was sarcastic, had a sour wit. But surely it was plain enough to anyone who really knew him that it was to cover his own shyness and sentimentality? It was a common enough defense mechanism in this country, where so many tough exteriors shielded soft hearts, where barbed remarks were like the protecting quills of a porcupine. Nobody wanted to look mushy or sound that way.

He was not Sir Galahad, and had no natural aptitude for playing the part.

He looked around. Old or young, everybody else appeared to be in

couples, absorbed in each other.

"Darn it, if I could find an unbracketed dame, I'd try the Sir Galahad line after all," he told himself. "O, sweet maiden, I am an unemployed parfit gentil knight, most willing to be thy humble escort in these dangerous woods, where dwelleth the fearsome—Oh, what the hell am I talking about?"

He didn't stop to answer himself, but jammed his sand-shoes on, flung a towel around his burnt shoulders, got up and moved off. He tacked and veered round the bodies on the beach—at first glance, the place looked like a battlefield, after the battle—towards the promenade.

And then he saw a blonde lying with her back towards him. Moreover, she was alone. Moreover, the back was shapely and so were the hips attached to it.

He stopped to admire the view. Also, to fight with his conscience. He won by a T. K. O. in the first round: What did he owe Livvy after the way she had spoken to him? The next fight was with his innate shyness, to decide whether Sir Galahad or plain Zechariah came out on top.

He thought of his lonely room, and had no desire to return to it. He looked at the beach and had no desire to remain there alone. His resolve hardened.

"To the attack, Sir Galahad," he thought, and walked towards the girl.

A few paces from her he halted suddenly. For it seemed from the way her hair was shaking and her fingers were gesticulating, that she was talking with animation to someone lying beside her.

Yet, from what he could see over the curved horizon of her right hip, there was no one there. Not unless it was something the size of a cat. Or perhaps—darn it!—a baby.

Maybe it was just her pet poodle.

However, Galahad's charger had been thrown off its stride. The somewhat uncertain gallant—who might have been styled "Galariah"—dismounted and tried a flanking approach, around the head.

From this viewpoint, three things became plain:

(a) The girl. "Homely" would be a compliment.

(b) The fact that she was, indisputably, talking to nobody and nothing, not even a piece of dried seaweed.

(c) The reasons why she was alone, which were (a) and (b).

Zechariah shook his head sadly, and went on to the promenade.

"Thought there must be a catch in it somewhere," he reflected.

HE WENT into one of the cafeterias on the promenade, and bought tickets for a sandwich, an ice cream, and a cup of coffee. He collected the food from a counter and took it to a table. An attendant came round sponging the tables clean and removing debris.

"I only do this so's I can get through law school," said the attendant quietly, without looking at him.

"Most—er—praiseworthy," said Zechariah.

The attendant looked at him as if he hadn't noticed he was there, and looked slightly embarrassed.

"Pardon me, I was talking to my friend."

"Oh," said Zechariah, a trifle blankly. "Where do you carry him—in that empty coffee cup?"

The attendant looked away in the other direction, and said: "Don't mind him. We get people like that in here every day. Wise guys. But they don't mean any harm."

He walked through to the tiny kitchen. It was a narrow door, so he politely stood aside to let his friend through first. His friend was, it

seemed, Mr. Wells' invisible man.

Zechariah thought, "Two nuts in five minutes—pretty good collecting. You can spend too much time on that beach in this hot sun. Guess I shan't overdo it, after this, in case I get that way too."

He finished, and went through the bushes at the back of the prom to the car park. He changed in his car, and headed homeward. When he was halfway home, it occurred to him that the blonde might merely have been an actress learning her part. Perhaps he'd thrown away an opportunity. Then he remembered her face, and decided he hadn't. If she'd been learning a part, then it was a low comedy part.

He spent a lonely evening in his apartment reading the Sunday supplements. The sole thought accruing to him from this exercise was that if only God can make a tree, only man could make a tree into such sprawling idiocy.

He thought twice about ringing Livvy, and turned down the idea both times. Let her approach him, if she wanted to—he had his pride. Then he rang her without thinking about it, and she was out.

USUALLY HE loathed Monday mornings, but he was glad when this one came around. There would be someone to talk to at the office, even if it were only about the humidity.

There was a queer incident on the subway.

He went to sit down on a vacant seat next to a fellow who looked as though he might be an understudy to Maxie Rosenbloom, and the fellow reached out and stopped him and said, "This seat's taken."

"Taken where?" said Zechariah, did a double take at the other's shoulders, and added, "Sorry."

He parked himself across the aisle, which was a good spot from which to observe the big man addressing confidential remarks to the vacant seat. The guy in the empty seat must have been good company, for he made the bulky fellow smile quite a lot and look pleased with life in general and himself in particular.

The morning passed all right in the office on the fourth floor of the small old-fashioned building. Zechariah made the usual crack to Abrahams; the elevator man, about how he should have rubbed Maria's joints with camphorated oil because of her rheumatics. ("Maria" was the name given by Abrahams, with affection, to his creaky, fifty-year old elevator.) And Abrahams had replied, with his usual mock-seriousness, "I sure must try that, Zechy."

And over the ledgers he had an interesting discussion with Smith about the Saturday ball games.

True, there was the odd moment when he had to take an account into the boss, and had paused, listening, outside the boss's door to make sure he wasn't busting into an interview. There was the murmur of a voice within. It sounded rather like the boss's, but it couldn't have been; it was too gentle. The boss was not gentle.

He went back to his desk. "Hey, Smithy, who's in with the boss?"

"No one, far as I know."

"Maybe he's on the phone," said Zechariah, and checked at the switchboard. But the plug for the boss's extension lay idle.

He returned to listen at the door. Silence. He knocked.

"Come in," said the boss.

The boss was in a good mood. When Zechariah, handing him the big account sheet, knocked the boss's cigarette from the edge of the desk to the carpet, where it added a brown

spot to the pattern, the boss, instead of bawling "When it's time to burn down the building to collect the insurance, I'll let you know!" graciously bent and retrieved the cigarette himself and said, with a smile, "Careless of me."

Yes, the morning went well.

AT LUNCHTIME when Zechariah rang for the elevator to go down, he was a bit annoyed when Abrahams came floating up in the empty elevator and went on up to the top floor, and then came down again in a still empty Maria and would have descended to the basement if Zechariah hadn't shouted.

Abrahams brought Maria up again. He was apologetic.

"Sorry, Zechy, didn't see you standing there. Guess I was too busy explaining to my pal how Maria worked."

"Where's your pal?" asked Zechariah, stepping in.

Abrahams looked almost guilty.

"He's gone now," he mumbled.

After that, the thing spread rapidly. It became obvious to Zechariah that an epidemic of mild lunacy had hit New York. Along the sidewalks he met person after person talking quietly but generally enthusiastically to invisible and inaudible companions. Even the cop on the corner by the drugstore was happily addressing remarks and listening to the empty air above the curb. It was the first time Zechariah had seen him smile.

The drugstore was well sprinkled with people having a tete-a-tete with themselves. He was politely—always politely—dissuaded from taking several apparently empty seats.

He sat hunched over his malted milk at the counter, and when Ruben came by again, collecting the empties, he said from the corner of his mouth, "Pst! Rube."

"Yeah?"

"What's got into everybody today? Look, are these people talking to themselves, or is it me that's gone nuts?"

Ruben said, "Neither. It's all right. I guess these folks just brought their friends along."

Zechariah stared at him. "Nice to see the place full," he said.

"Yeah," said Ruben. "'Course, it don't put any more dough in the till. Their friends don't eat. But I like it. Might be good for business later—it adds a nice folksy sorta atmosphere to the joint."

"But—can you see or hear their friends?"

"Nope. That's all right, too. Better that way, I guess. Everybody's entitled to a little privacy."

Zechariah was smitten by a suspicion. "Have you got a friend, Rube?"

"Yeah. He's over there by the percolator. Guess you can't see him. Nicest guy I ever met. Why don't you get one? Excuse me."

A customer had called, and Ruben, throwing a grin in the general vicinity of the coffee percolator in passing, attended to him.

Zechariah put his hand to his brow. There seemed to be rather more sweat there than usual. Fever?

But he discovered on the way back to the office that there was hope for his health—even, perhaps, for his sanity. For there were still plenty of folks around who were as bewildered as he was. He could see it from their attitude, their puzzled stares, their way of regarding him warily to see if *he* was a nut.

Here and there were groups of these people talking guardedly together, airing their theories about the widespread hallucinations. He joined one such group for a few minutes.

"Might be mass hypnosis. I knew a Hindu one..."

"...cloud of germs in the air. I got one to the hospital, but they knew nothing about it. I could tell the guy was lying—probably suffering from it himself..."

"...told me his friend's name was Earl. But I couldn't see any Earl..."

"...some sorta ray, I guess, causing mental instab—instab—causing you to see things. These Reds are clever devils..."

"Something in the water, of course. I always said..."

It was an oasis of normality in a world gone haywire, and he was reluctant to leave it. But he had to get back to the office to release Smithy.

When Smith returned from lunch he looked a bit distraught. He came over to Zechariah and muttered, "Have you noticed anything queer in the air today?"

"I sure have," said Zechariah, with relief. "Gee, I'm glad you haven't gone loopy too, Smithy. Most people seem to have."

"You mean, they're talking to themselves?"

"Yes. There's old Abrahams..."

They exchanged accounts of their experiences.

"The boss, too," said Zechariah. "I'm sure he was talking to himself this morning."

"I believe you're right. He's not the same man today. He hasn't bawled anybody out, and he even held the door open for me at the washroom."

"I've noticed," said Zechariah, "that the symptoms include a sort of absent-minded politeness and good humor. Well, that's a thing to be thankful for. Imagine if it had been an epidemic of homicidal mania! I expect it'll die out overnight, and we'll never know what caused it."

IT SHOWED no sign of dying out—quite the reverse.

When Zechariah started for home,

he had an unpleasant and humiliating ride in the subway. He had to strap-hang, yet almost every other seat was vacant—at least, to his eyes. Not to the eyes of the people sitting next to the empty seats.

He had tried twice to sit down.

"Hey, gently, brother. You're trying to sit on my pal."

"Take it easy, son. That seat's occupied."

Both men had said it with a smile, but firmly. He didn't try any more, but remained standing, the only figure who was, while the coach was full of the susurrations—audible even above the clatter of the train—of people conducting quiet conversation with their unseen partners. It was more than humiliating; it was unnerving. It was like something out of *The Snake Pit*. He stared around at these gently smiling and nodding people, who seemed oblivious to each other, to him, and to all except the vacant seats at their side.

He could stand it no longer and escaped at the next station and took a taxi home. At least, he was alone in the back. Which was more than the driver thought he was out front.

He decided that until all this was over he'd use his car for traveling to and from work, despite the traffic jams.

The evening stretched out wearily and emptily before him. He thought of going to a movie, and then had a brief premonitory nightmare of what might result:

"That seat's occupied."

"That seat's occupied."

"That seat's occupied."

He groaned. He never liked going alone to a picture in the best of times. He'd always believed that a pleasure shared was a pleasure doubled. When Livvy was not available to share with him he found entertainments unentertaining.

It occurred to him that apart from Livvy and Smithy he had no friends in New York. He felt an outcast in the big city.

It was largely his own fault; he did not make friends easily. People grew wary of his stabbing sarcasm, and never pursued his acquaintance. They were not able to know how lonely and in need of them he was behind the bitter, defensive humor. That hadn't mattered so much so long as he had Livvy. She was a native of his home town, Hatton. She had moved with her family to New York, and he had followed later.

Well, he had swallowed his pride yesterday when he had tried to ring her. Now there was little pride left. He would make it up with her even if he had to eat two helpings of humble pie.

HE DROVE over to her house. She opened the door herself. She did not look particularly pleased to see him.

"Hello, Livvy. Didn't see you at the beach yesterday."

"That's not surprising. I wasn't there."

He nearly said, "There are enough nuts about to have seen you there all the same." But he checked it. Livvy didn't approve of his humor, and somehow it mattered that someone should approve of him. Instead, he said, "Oh, I see. It was a great disappointment. I'm very sorry for the way I spoke, Livvy."

"My name is still Olivia." But she said it absently. There was no sting to it. He was glad of that.

"Sorry, Olivia. Er—can I come in?"

"Ma and Pa have got visitors. They don't want to be disturbed."

"But it was you I wanted to see."

"I have a visitor, too."

"In your room?" He was suddenly hurt and suspicious.

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"What makes you think it's a he?"

"Isn't it?"

She said quietly, "It's entirely my own business. You might as well go, Zechariah. You had better take this with you. Thanks for what you've done, but I shan't make any more demands on you."

She had slipped off her engagement ring and was holding it out to him.

He was amazed and indignant. The last notions he had of trying to be patient and humble with her were scattered by the wind of black fury which swept over him. He dashed her hand aside, and the ring tinkled on the stone step. He thrust past her, strode blindly down the passage and flung into her room.

There were the two big armchairs and they were empty. So was the sofa, on which they had sat so often in silent happiness. The book-shelves, the reading lamp on the little table, the sewing machine—the room was as he'd always known it, cozy and inviting to any visitor. But there was no visitor, except himself.

He went to the window. It was shut and latched on the inside.

She came into the room, pale but composed. He turned to her.

"Why did you lie to me?" he asked, in quiet anger.

She didn't even look at him. She addressed the armchair beside the reading lamp: "Rosamund, dear, I know you'll forgive this intrusion. This gentleman didn't know you were here. He's just leaving."

A hand of ice fastened about his heart. Livvy, too? Lost to him, gone to join the ranks of the crazed. His anger dissolved.

"Livvy," he said, in a trembling voice, "there is no one in that chair."

But she seemed to be listening to another voice. Then she said, "It's so nice of you to say so. You're so kind."

You won't ever leave me, will you, Rosamund?"

He strode over and seized her by the shoulders.

"Livvy! Pull yourself together."

Almost dreamily, she became aware of him again, and gently removed his hands from her.

"Please leave us, Zechariah. You're interrupting a private conversation."

Even before she had finished speaking, her eyes wandered back to the chair.

He went out in despair. He hesitated at the door of her parents' parlor, then knocked and pushed it open. Visitors or no visitors, he felt that he must speak to Livvy's parents about her.

Her mother and father were the only two people in the room. They were talking eagerly—but not to each other. They didn't see him at the door. He pulled it shut again without saying a word; he saw the uselessness of it.

As he drove home, he was not far from tears. He hardly slept all that night.

IT WAS all much worse the next day.

He didn't see any of the groups of people like those of yesterday who had been as much at sea as himself. Everybody seemed to be quite satisfied with the state of affairs.

The sidewalks of New York had always seemed to Zechariah uncomfortable places for anyone who wished merely to saunter along with his thoughts and dreams. Dreamers were liable to be elbowed and shoved by the hurrying—always hurrying—pedestrians with their set, tense faces, intent on getting somewhere before someone else did. Victims hypnotized by words: Success, Efficiency, Hustle.

But today no one was in a hurry. It was almost like Hatton. Everyone strolled as if they were just taking the

air. On the rare occasions when there were collisions, the participants smiled and apologized graciously and insisted that it was their fault: "I was talking to my friend, and didn't see you."

For Zechariah it had some of the outlandish, intangible terror of an opium dream.

Zechariah was the only person on the sidewalks who was hurrying. He wanted to get to the sanctuary of the office. He got there early, and fussed about getting the books out of the safe and setting them out, waiting impatiently for Smith.

Smith arrived late, and Zechariah seized him—it was clutching at a straw.

"Smithy, it's getting worse. I don't think I've seen one sane person this morning. Am I glad to see you!"

Smith said, casually, "What's that? Oh, yes. I'm glad to see you, too, Zechy."

"I can't understand it," said Zechariah. "There wasn't a thing in the papers about it last evening, nor again this morning. Nothing on the video, either, nor the radio."

"I listened to the radio last night with my friend," said Smith. "The N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra. My friend likes good music."

"Your friend?" said Zechariah, slowly, and somewhere within him a soundless voice cried: "No, no! Not Smithy! He's my last hope."

Smith looked rather embarrassed.

"Er—you don't know him," he said.

"Look, Smithy, you haven't let me down? You haven't gone the way of the others?" He was pleading.

"Of course not, Zechy. I'll always be your friend."

"What about your other friend? Where is he now?"

"He's... Well, it's hard to explain..."

"You mean, Harvey's here now, and I can't see him?"

"It's something like that...I'm sorry about this."

"Oh, Smithy! You've thrown me over for a white rabbit!"

"I'm terribly sorry to have put you in this spot, Harvey. Zechy's always ribbing. Don't take too much notice of him."

Zechariah looked at him aghast. Smith wasn't apologizing to him, but to some vision of his fancy standing against the tall green filing cabinet.

"You—you actually call him 'Harvey'?" he stuttered.

"It's his name," said Smith, simply.

"It's been copyrighted," said Zechariah, viciously. He tried, not very successfully, to calm himself. He would only alienate Smithy altogether with such spiteful sarcasm. He said, "You'll be coming with me to see the Giants at the Friday evening game?"

"Not this week, Zechy. You see, my friend and I—"

Zechariah cut loose again. "Your friend!" he growled, and in a mad spasm of fury he swung a left hook at what he judged to be the geographical position of Harvey. He raised quite a draft, scraped his knuckles on the edge of the steel cabinet, and almost overbalanced.

"Harvey!" cried Smith, in lively alarm. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"Bah!" exclaimed Zechariah in disgust, and stamped out of the office. He knew he had lost Smith now, and nothing much seemed to matter except getting out of this crazy city.

THE NEXT morning he was sitting in the little defile in the Alleghenies where as a child he had played alone for hours. In this retreat he used to hold up the stage-coach singlehanded, kill half a dozen redskins every time he swept the rocks with his six-shooter, and (after he'd seen Douglas Fairbanks in *The Mark*

of Zorro) leap around carving Z marks with his rapier on the villains. Z for Zorro. Z for Zechariah.

The rocky wall opposite him still bore the faint trace of a ragged Z scratched on it well over twenty years ago by the steel spike (from Pa Young's tool-shed) which was his rapier.

He sat there on a rock, tired after the all-night drive, heartbroken by his reception down there in Hatton, and haunted by the memory of the small boy who had played in this place all day long with his head in a cloud of make-believe. It seemed to him that he had always had to play along alone. Was it because he didn't trust people, or because there was some element in him—his habit of mockery?—they didn't trust? He had thought that with Livvy and Smithy the barriers were down, that they shared an outlook with him.

And when they failed him, he had fled back to Pa Young, Chick Martin, Ma Schmidt, Pinky Chandler, and the others in Hatton who'd known him since he was a child. (He had no family of his own.)

He hadn't expected a civic reception, but he had hoped for a friendly: "Well, if it ain't Zechy, back from the big city! How ya makin' out, Zechy? My, you look well! Come in and see the family."

And it hadn't been like that at all. Pa, Chick, Ma, Pinky—they all had companions in whom they were much more interested. The delusions, it seemed, were nation-wide.

All Pa Young had said was, "'Lo, Zechy—ain't seen you lately," and he'd passed on, talking about crops to a silent and unseen listener.

The others had just said "Howdy" absently in response to his greeting, and didn't seem either to remember him or willing to make the effort to try to.

And as he had fled from New York, so he fled from Hatton, up into the lonely hills.

Now he had to face it: He hadn't a friend in the world.

Why, if all this had to happen, hadn't it happened to him too? What had he done that he should be singled out for this doubtful distinction of being the last sane man around?

Where could he go, what could he do? If he went back among people, he'd fall victim to a raving persecution mania sooner or later.

Should he pretend he had a friend? What good would that do? He couldn't fool himself, and no one else cared whether he was friendless or not.

Become a hermit here? What a prospect! But at least he knew his bearings in this playground of his youth; every stone of it was familiar. It was something known and loved to cling to.

But he knew in his heart that he would exchange all of these cold, unresponsive stones for just one friendly greeting.

"Mind if I sit down there?" It was a quiet, slow drawl.

ZECHARIAH looked up. It was a stranger; a tall guy, with slicked back graying hair, a thin, brown leathery face, and very blue eyes crinkled at the outer corners. He looked a humorous, sympathetic, alert type. Nevertheless, Zechariah distrusted him, creeping up on him like this in this nook he'd come to regard as his own.

"Guess I can't stop you," said Zechariah, sourly. "But this rock isn't wide enough for the three of us."

"Three of us?"

"No doubt you've brought your friend with you."

"No. He's already here."

"Where is he supposed to be?"

"He's supposed to be sitting on that rock, and he is, and his name is Zechariah."

Zechariah's heart leaped.

"Me?" he said, incredulously. The man nodded, smiling.

"Oh," said Zechariah, and suddenly something gave, and the tears welled up in his eyes. Somebody wanted him.

The man sat down beside him. "I represent a society called The Happy Circle, Zechy," he said. "There's a great many of us out on active service just now. You see, people everywhere have been losing faith in everything, in themselves, in other people. One finds so few people one can really trust in these times when everyone is out for himself. There aren't many people who are as self-reliant and unselfish as you are, Zechy."

"I wish I'd met you before," sniffed Zechariah. "Why did you leave me until last?"

"Because you were the strongest, the most mature. The Happy Circle gave the weakest priority—it was only fair, you'll agree. It was decided that a man of your moral fibre could outlast them all—and you did. Then I was picked to befriend you. If I don't satisfy, you can have me changed—"

"I shouldn't dream of it!" exclaimed Zechariah. "You don't know what it means—or do you?—to have someone understanding to talk to. I couldn't have lasted much longer. Perhaps I sounded tougher than I really am. You see, I've never been properly understood..."

AUROLIER MINOR, of the Earth (Human) Division of the Safety Executive, stamped the tiny red star against the last name on the last page of the last volume of the Directory labeled "America (North)."

The name was Zyzincwicz, Zechariah Zebedee. Beside it was "Polish-American, b. Hatton, Penn., 1918"

and a string of references relating to the files kept by the Physiological, Psychological, and Historical sub-sections.

Aurolier Minor gave a little sigh. He said, "That's the last of that lot—over a hundred and thirty million of them. Well, it's a good start."

Brightor, who belonged to the Canal Division of the Safety Executive, and was merely visiting his friend in this Division, of which he knew little, looked at the packed shelves and read out names: "America (South), Andaman Islands, Antarctica, Arabia, Australia, Austria... You've certainly got a long way to go. So much manual work, too. I'm glad my Division is almost all automatic stuff."

Aurolier Minor said, "Our friends across there have a saying: 'The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.' If we substitute 'safety' for 'liberty', it becomes most apt."

(Far out in the red Martian desert the radar towers picked up the great meteor heading towards the planet, and gave its speed, size, and direction to the computing machines. They buzzed, and gave the answer: "Class C"—which meant that the meteor was large enough for a considerable residue to reach the ground, and its path would bring it dangerously near a Martian city. "Class C" was flashed to the Destroying Department together with all necessary information, and within two seconds the explosive rocket leaped to meet the intruder at ten times the latter's speed. A thousand miles above the last vestige of the thin atmosphere the meteor was blown into harmless dust.)

"They seem intelligent—why are they dangerous?" said Brightor.

"Their civilization has become too complicated, too unstable. They are frustrated, and therefore fearful and

angry. In that condition they may use their H-bombs, disintegrate their planet, and harm us with the consequent radiation. They are still children. Yet, basically, they have the same needs as ourselves: To be significant and secure. But, in their childish way, they also need to be loved."

"That's one need we outgrew," said Brightor. "With the result that we've been completely sterile for half a million years. And here we are, a handful of us, incredibly old and fragile, clinging tenuously to life—for what?"

"For satisfaction of the need to be significant and secure."

"Exactly. We exist for our Divisions; without them we don't mean a thing. Our Divisions exist so that we can exist—for our Divisions. Safety first! It's a vicious circle; our lives are pointless. We might just as well let them destroy themselves, and us, with their bombs. If they survive, they'll only come to this."

"Maybe not," said Aurolier Minor. "Did we outgrow the need to be loved—or grow away from it?"

"I... don't know. What is love, exactly?"

"I DON'T know—exactly. But I know that a very important ingredient of it is mutual reassurance. The loved reassures the lover, and in turn is reassured by him. The trouble with our friends is that their need to be loved is as strong as ever, but it is being frustrated by the too rapid discovery—especially in science—that most of their beliefs have been false. For instance, once, they believed their Earth was the center and reason for existence of the universe. Then their astronomers showed them their actual insignificance. There's been a whole series of such shocks to their self-esteem and to their faith in be-

liefs of any kind. Now they've become suspicious of everything and everybody. They're always looking for the catch. They trust no one, not even themselves. The frustrated love instinct coils back on itself, changes its direction and therefore its nature, and becomes a flux of fear and hate."

(One of the thousands of Canal Division floats which continuously and automatically patrolled the canals and tested their contents, brought up a sampling bottle with an invader in it. It was a tiny, cell-like growth, apparently alone in the water. It was probably quite harmless, but its pattern did not agree with any of the known harmless species. The electronic supervisor of the float did not hesitate; its instructions had been clear. It destroyed the invader. Safety First. Prevention was better than a cure.)

"And so—?" prompted Brightor.

"And so they have to express their need for significance and security through fear and hate—the angry fight for power, to get on top to show they're important and to have a feeling of security when all rivals are vanquished."

"Pitiful. They can still believe, but only in illusions of that kind."

"That's why the Director ordered an immediate change of their illusions," said Aurolier Minor. "Before they can respect others, they must be re-educated to respect themselves—that mad over-compensation had to be stopped. They had to be given back faith. The multitudinous voices of their civilization telling them this was false, that was false, they were fools to believe this or that or anything, until they were warped with doubt and heading for general neurosis, had to be replaced by a single voice of reassurance."

"Something of a headache, providing two thousand million single voices, isn't it?"

"No, it's fairly simple. What each individual craves to be said to him exists as a wishful thought in his mind already. The pattern is pretty uniform: Benign approval, sincere praise. As you know—and as the humans themselves are beginning to discover—a thought is the individual structure of a molecule. All we do is set up a selector beam and a link to the vision centers of their brains. Once started, it works quite automatically, and they supply the energy themselves. They begin talking to themselves, giving themselves a boost."

BRIGHTOR SAID, "And is that their whole future now—talking to themselves? It seems rather heartless."

"Oh, no. Repetition will eventually bore them—like continually looking in a mirror; you get tired of your own face. Then they will turn their attention outwards again to their fellows. It will be a much more friendly attention, because they will be much more pleased with themselves and more stable altogether. Happy, balanced people. One of their own poets once wrote 'O, make us happy and you make us good.'"

Brightor smiled. "And we should say 'O, make them happy and you make us safe!'"

Then he stopped smiling as the voice from the tiny capsule in his ear spoke to him, intimately.

"I'll have to go," he told Aurolier Minor, in a moment. "My chief says our dredgers are finding more and more unidentified organisms in the Canals. I must make a thorough examination of the things. Good-bye for now—I'll be back in a decade or so to see how your work's turned out."

Aurolier Minor grunted, and

reached for the first volume of "America (South)." It was wholly made up of the names of the people concerned with the distribution of news by any means: Video, radio, film, or print. The Director believed in putting first things first; when you're trying to calm people, you first calm those who are able to start a widespread panic.

All of the names were in strictly alphabetical order. The Director also believed in putting last things last. It was unfortunate for people in the "Z" section, reflected Aurolier Minor.

He opened the volume.

(The depression had formed near the North Pole of Mars, and a cold wind was trying to find its way south. Golan Wimor, of the Safety Executive (Meteorological Division), manipulated the controls of Air Current Channels so that the cold air would pass between the Cities and not over them. When people are very old, they must keep out of drafts...)

Aaron Aarons, Foreign Editor of one of the biggest dailies in Buenos Aires, rang for a sub-editor. But a kindly-looking man he did not know entered instead, and said, "May I see you for a few moments, Senor Aarons?"

"If you're trying to sell anything, don't try," said Aarons, with a frown.

"Oh, no. It's about your piece in yesterday's edition. An admirable summing up of the situation, I thought. There was one point which struck me particularly."

"Oh," said Aarons, mollified. "What was that? Sit down."

The stranger sat down. He spoke very intelligently about Aarons' article. They had an interesting conversation.

Half an hour later, Aarons told the man—Pablo, his name was—confidentially, "You know, I've never been properly understood..."

THE END

NOBODY'S FUEL . . .

By
JUNE LURIE

AS FAR as our ravenous consumption of fuel goes—oil, gas and coal—even the most pessimistic predict a comparatively rosy future for this country. Not only are our reserves of these precious power-suppliers gigantic, but we've got that old ace up our sleeve, atomic power! In addition the laboratories are working overtime to make liquid and gaseous fuels cheaply from King Coal, of which there is absolutely no shortage whatsoever. So despite the accumulation of threatening war clouds and the ever present danger of drainage by jets, tanks and rockets, the American fuel situation doesn't look bad at all.

Probably the major reason for this is not the still promised atomic energy which will take some time to perfect. Rather the solution of our fuel problem lies in the generation of gas and liquids from coal. Now this is nothing new. Everyone knows that foreign nations including the Soviet have supplied a good portion of their energy requirements from coal-made-into-oil. In the perfection of this process so that

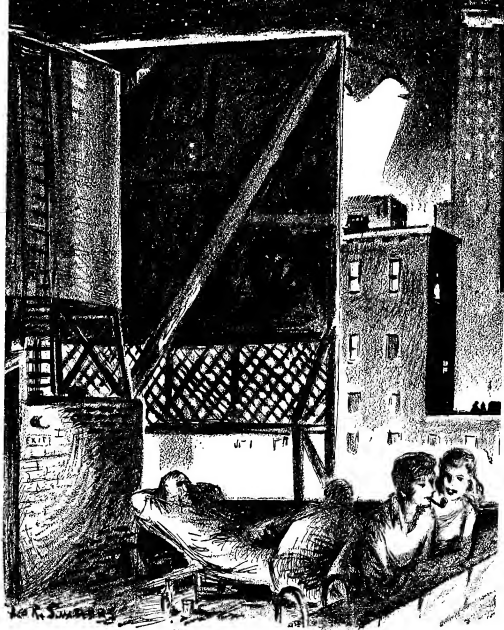
it is extremely cheap, lies the answer.

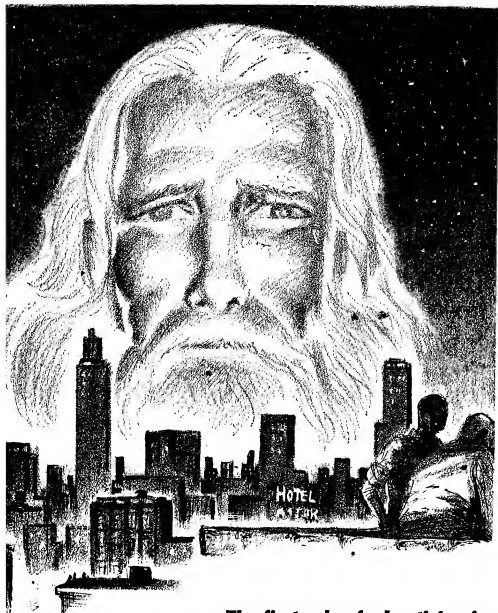
America lives on liquid fuel. In the future when the car and helicopter, the truck and the Diesel extend their sway even farther, fuel consumption will go higher. The pessimists of the past, predicting that we'd strangle because of the eventual run-out of this precious commodity, failed to reckon with the ubiquitous test-tube boys. Jerking dirty, heavy coal around the country is a waste of time and energy when you can nicely pipe the gas or liquid from one place to the other. Twenty or thirty years from now we'll have reached that point entirely.

Coal, *per se*, is being used less and less. As gas and oil decrease in quantity from the natural fields, the natural resource of course is the coal-conversion process. When the chemical rockets go skyward their insatiable demand will have to be satisfied. And all chemicals go to that old source of energy, coal. Because we have so much, we need never fear that the American future will be pastoral. Our machines won't run down!

CONDITIONED REFLEX

By William P. McGivern





**The first rule of advertising is:
Be sure your slogan can be seen. So, if
Honest John can use the sky to sell cars,
why can't God use it to give us a message?**

ONE MORNING the face of God appeared in the sky. People on their way to work in Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, Detroit, Butte, and San Francisco, stared at the phenomenon in surprise. They observed the noble forehead, the strong firm features, the gentle yet arresting eyes, and they said to one another, "Why that looks just

like the pictures of God you used to see in Bibles and prayer books."

The face gazed down upon Earth with what one perceptive witness described as a somewhat puzzled expression.

Newspapermen realized that this thing was the biggest news story in years, and they went after it with considerable enthusiasm....

Stanley Reeves, managing editor of the largest paper in New York, sent for his best men. He told them: "Jones, you'll do the running story; Nelson, you dig up a feature angle; and Smith, I want you to take care of the Man In The Street."

Reeves then sent for his religion editor and told him to arrange interviews with a cardinal and several rabbis.

"This sort of business is their specialty, after all," he said, and then personally got to work blocking out the headlines to use on the main story.

Nelson, the feature writer, came back to the office two hours later, dead drunk. He sat at his desk and put his head down on his folded arms.

Reeves hurried from his office and shook Nelson by the shoulder. "Come on, man, we need copy," he said.

Nelson straightened up slowly, and although he was obviously in the midst of a Homeric drunk, there was a thoughtful little smile on his lips.

"No, I can't do it," he said. "I looked at the face for an hour, trying to get an idea. And then I got to thinking, what the hell kind of lead could I put on a story? What can I say? 'Early-risers were surprised this morning when God--'" He stopped, shaking his head. "Can't do it, you see. We should all go out into the streets and listen—"

"Good God, he's not talking, is he?"

"No, but we should wait until he

does."

"Wait?" Reeves said. "We're on deadline, Nelson."

"Supposing we missed the edition," Nelson said in a gentle inquiring voice. "Supposing we all stopped running around and went out in the streets and waited there. We should stop everything, I tell you, until we find out what this is all about."

Reeves regarded Nelson for a moment; then he patted him on the shoulder. "Knock off, get some sleep," he said. He glanced at the clock that faced the bank of rewrite men and then hurried on to the city desk with a few instructions for the big story.

WITHIN a few hours, wire copy was clattering in on teletype and cable from all parts of the world, and it became apparent from the first leads that there was a new twist to the story.

People weren't agreeing on the physical description of the face, it was discovered. In China, for instance, the masses thought it looked like Buddha, and in India the face was considered to be that of Brahma or Allah, depending on whether the observer was a Hindu or Moslem.

Three days went by, and nothing new happened. The face remained in the sky, staring solemnly and with a barely discernible touch of bewilderment at the people of the earth.

Everyone grew accustomed to it after a while and went about their work pretty much as before. Preparations for the war no one wanted went on steadily after the slight interruption caused by the face of God in the sky.

Psychiatrists explained the face as being an example of mass hysteria. They said that in these times people needed reassurance from some exterior source, and were unconsciously

creating a mirage that would give them a sense of security. God, they said, was a classic security symbol.

The United States Senate disposed of the matter very quickly in a special session.

"I know an enemy trick when I see one," declared the senior senator from a great Midwestern state, as flash bulbs popped and the galleries cheered.

Scientists took over after most religious leaders had branded the apparition a fake. The scientists made a series of tremendously delicate tests, which proved conclusively that the face had no actual substance at all. They tried to weigh it, to analyze its coloring, and locate it in space. They failed to pin down any physical facts whatsoever, and this was considered a great triumph for science.

Meanwhile, the war came closer. A great block of countries issued a biting statement to the effect that the face was created by capitalistic nations to undermine the real authority of the Supreme State.

Both sides called each other Godless!

However, the scientists weren't done with the face of God yet. They announced plans for shooting a rocket at it. This caused a good deal of discussion. Some people wanted to know what good that would do. Others said it wasn't the business of science to do good, but to do *something* and then measure the results.

ON THE fifth day, a man ran through the streets of New York screaming at everyone to listen to him. He shouted: "Stop what you're doing. Stop everything! Listen to what He can tell us."

The man's manner was so frightening and his words so patently senseless that a crowd quickly gathered

and chased him through the streets. He was caught by several hundred sane citizens and beaten to death.

Newspapermen were saddened to learn that it was their colleague Nelson who was thus killed.

The work of the scientists went on apace. Congress had voted a million dollars with which to build the rockets, and launching sites for the great missiles were quickly erected.

On the seventh day amid general excitement the first of the rockets was launched.

People crowded the streets and cheered as the fish-shaped objects whizzed off into space, trailing a spray of sparks in their wake.

A bewildered child said, "Why are they doing it?" but his mother shook him and warned him about asking foolish questions.

The face of God, seemingly more puzzled than ever, began to fade from the sky.

The people cheered.

Within a matter of seconds, only the eyes of God were visible in the sky. The gentle arresting eyes were still puzzled and compassionate; but they were also somewhat stern.

And eventually they faded away into the blue sky and disappeared forever.

That night, diplomatic relations were severed between the two important blocks of nations; and still later that night, planes winged their way across the Atlantic carrying hydrogen bombs suspended from special racks. Other planes going in the opposite direction set out about the same time, carrying similar racks and similar bombs.

The planes passed each other in the blackness without being aware of each other, and droned on toward their distant targets.

THE END

THE BRAIN THAT

By Alfred Coppel

The Brain was the largest and most complex thinking machine that had ever been built. But it had one fault — no imagination

JOHAN MEEK'S first sight of the Brain was from the crest of the fortified ridge. The car topped the twisting grade, and there it was—sprawling over ten acres of desertland—a vast blind cube surrounded by triple barbed-wire fences and lookout towers. The road, commanded by a score of hidden guns, wound around it across the face of the barren land, like some grey asphalt snake, alive and shimmering in the heat of midday.

At closer range, it was even more awesome. Guardposts dotted the desert and a flight of jets patrolled above, streaking the brassy sky with long white contrails.

The business of getting through the security cordon took more than an hour, and it was not until thirteen hundred hours that Meek emerged from the olive-drab scarab car to vanish quickly into the monstrous building that housed the Brain.



LOST ITS HEAD



The catwalk twisted and writhed, and Meek looked down to find it had become a snake

Inside, Meek immediately sensed the wrongness. The corridors should have been teeming with techs and officers. But the only sound was the echoing beat of his own footsteps on the gleaming white tiles. It was cool and dim—like the inside of cathedral. The few techs about spoke in hushed whispers, as though afraid to break the spell of silence.

General Robart met him in the Commandant's office. A tall grey man with three stars on his blouse. "I'm Commandant here, Meek," the officer said abruptly. The voice was gravelly and edged with an anxiety that could not be mistaken. "Sit down, and I'll get to the point quickly."

John Meek did as he was told. He swallowed hard and waited. In spite of himself, he was impressed. Only a few hours ago, he had been teaching his class in robopsychology, and now he sat before the chief of the country's most secret project. The interim was a montage of questions and investigations and grim-faced men in uniform.

"What do you know about this project?" Robart asked sharply.

"Very little, sir. Only that all this..." He indicated his surroundings. "...is the Brain. Everyone calls it that."

The general got to his feet and began pacing nervously. "There's more, of course. But that's the substance of it. This building houses the largest and most complex thinking machine that has ever been built. At present, it is primarily a weapon. A weapon that will be composed of the sum total of man's learning. A super-brain, if you will. As a robot man, you understand all this, of course. You will also understand that the possibilities of this thinking machine are almost unlimited. We can't begin to comprehend the latent powers of the Brain. Potentially, this mechanical mind can

do—anything. I mean just that. Anything. You can see that."

JOHAN MEEK could. In a sense, any robot was a superman. Within the limitations set up by considerations of the robot's purpose, every mechanical brain was a genius. And a thinking machine as large as the Brain... The thought brought excitement. Paraphysical energy, telepathy, teleportation, psychokinesis—all theoretically possible for the electronic giant above them.

"I see you understand the possibilities," Robart said drily. "But let us examine the accomplishments. In the last three days, the Brain has supplied us with these glittering gems of truth." He handed Meek a paper on which were printed three lines. There were no punctuations, no words. Only a jumble of letters. "Our cryptographers worked themselves grey haired over that until one cracked it. It's a fragment of an ancient chant credited to one Prester John, a contemporary of Kukul Kan. The original was rendered in hybrid Mongol-Sanskrit, and since the Brain's typers only reproduce phonetic characters, it came out like that. What do you think of it?"

"Doesn't make sense," Meek said, mystified. "Why should the Brain turn up something like this? What did you ask it for?"

"The probable blast effect on the Holcomb Tower in Berkeley of a hydrogen fusion-bomb dropped in San Francisco Bay," the general said distastefully. "But there's more." He glanced at his wristwatch. "In about half a minute now, I should say."

Meek looked about expectantly. "What is going to happen in about a half—?"

He was cut short by the clangor of a thousand bells. The whole structure seemed to reverberate to the majestic tolling of them. Church bells. Cathe-

dral bells. They seemed to fill the room with a throbbing, brazen sound. Presently, they were still, the last faint overtones fading away.

"Seven times a day that happens," Robart said. "You're a robopsychologist, Meek. What do you make of that? There are no bells in this building, you know. The Brain creates them—or their sound."

"But why?"

"You know cybernetics. You tell me. And something else, Meek," Robart said quietly. "Since this began—at eleven hundred hours of last Friday—the Brain has spoken one coherent sentence through the speakers. Now, we have checked you very carefully. We know that you have never been here before, and that you have not been mentioned in any of the books that have been fed into the Brain's memory through the scanners. Yet, the Brain asked for you. By name."

"What?" Meek felt the short hairs on the back of his neck rise.

"By name," the general said again. "I don't know how it knew you existed, but it asked for you." He turned away before continuing. "I'm going to say something that may sound strange coming from a military man, Meek, but the Brain scares me. My men have reported devils outside the wire. Yes, devils. Red, with horns, tails and pitchforks. Hallucinations, of course. But induced hallucinations. I think the Brain is getting out of hand, Meek. It's running away from us in the only direction it knows. Into itself."

"You're saying that the Brain is insane, sir?"

"That's for you to say. You have the training to find out. Maybe the damn thing has a short circuit somewhere that the techs can't find. And maybe it goes deeper than that." The general's face was set and pale. "Find

out, Meek, before it's too late...."

FOR THREE weeks, John Meek studied the grids and circuits that made up the Brain. He fed it word-association tests and ink-blots. The machine cooperated well. But cooperated was the word. Meek recognized immediately that the mammoth robot possessed free-will. And what it would do for him, it would do for no one else. He was the chosen one.

Meanwhile, reports from outside filtered through the guard cordons around the restricted area. Two city blocks of downtown Los Angeles were leveled in a mysterious explosion, and ghouls danced in the streets of Chicago.

Meek worked with a sense of urgency that verged on panic. Always with him was the sensation of latent power in the sprawling giant, and there was the clangor of the bells.

On the last day of the third week, the city of Kiev was completely demolished by an atomic explosion. A man ran amok in Seattle, killing twenty people before the police could subdue him. He babbled a tale of seduction by a succubus, and was saved from the mob by reluctant peace officers.

Very slowly, the pattern began assuming reality to John Meek. The stark horror of it left him numbed and full of doubts.

ON THE FIRST day of the fourth week, Meek reported his findings to General Robart. Meek was gaunt and hollow-eyed from lack of sleep, and his hands trembled as he handed the general his reports.

"There it is, sir. And there's only one answer. The Brain is insane. Monomania." He sank down into a chair wearily. "I've checked and rechecked my findings a dozen times or more. There's no doubt. The Brain is suf-

fering from an acute religious monomania. It translates old hymns and chants. It rings bells at matins, prime, tierce, sext, nones, vespers and compline. The seven canonical hours. It has rejected everything it has accumulated that contradicts the Holy Bible—or its own very literal interpretation of it."

Robart stood half-disbelieving. "Dangerous?"

"The Brain is suffering from the same mental illness that guided the Inquisition, sir. And it thinks the world is full of evil—"

"Are you suggesting that those accidents—"

"Those were not accidents, General Robart. Los Angeles was blasted by a madman with a carload of dynamite. The man's brain was tampered with, I'm sure of it. The same for that berserk up in Seattle. Kiev was levelled by a fission bomb. Made here by the Brain and teleported to its target. Remember? We agreed that the powers of the mind are unlimited. . . ." Meek lit a cigarette with shaking hands. "Those ghouls and devils people have been seeing. Induced hallucinations, as you suspected. The old system. Terror. The same pattern has been used in religious warfare for centuries. Fire and sword. Now, the Brain has a religion. It has taken fragments from all and synthesized a faith. And it is prepared to force it on the world." He crushed the cigarette out viciously. "It can, you know."

Robart's voice was flat and harsh. "Unless we stop it," he said.

"You mean that?" Meek demanded.

"I mean it."

Meek looked long at the older man's face. It was taut, deep lines etched in it. General Robart looked suddenly old and somehow fragile. "All right, sir," Meek said quietly. "We will stop it tonight. The two of us—alone."

THE FLASHLIGHT cut a path through the darkness of the upper levels. All around, the dark shapes of electron tubes hummed with soft life. Ahead, at the very end of the narrow catwalk, lay the main grid-cells of the Brain. The fragile iridium-sponge plates floated in their gymbals within a quartz tube.

Meek and Robart cast eerie shadows onto the floor of the level below as they made their way toward the tube. Each man carried a heavy wrench in his hand. Meek could feel his heart pounding fearfully as each step brought him closer to the gently pulsating life within the quartz.

Now, they were almost within reach of it, and Meek could hear Robart's breath coming in short, hard rasps.

Suddenly, light flooded over them. A hard brilliance that flowed out of the tube ahead. Meek felt his heart sink. A humming voice thundered: "*I can see what is in your minds. Foolish men, you cannot harm the new Messiah!*"

"Keep going, Robart!" cried Meek, stumbling forward, wrench upraised.

A yellow ghoul danced in the air ahead of them, shrieking and baring broken fangs hungrily. A swarm of sour-smelling bats appeared and circled the apparition's head, like an obscene halo. More demons took form and swirled about between Meek and the glowing tube. The catwalk twisted and writhed beneath his feet; he looked down to see that it was a huge diamond-backed snake—

Meek screamed. Robart shoved him ahead, through the curtain of illusions.

The images vanished. The catwalk became real again. Meek rushed forward, his wrench lifted to strike.

Robart's hand closed on it from behind, tearing it from his grasp and letting it fall. Meek watched it vanish below in stupefied disbelief.

"Robart. . ."

The general's voice seemed to come from a great distance. It was no longer harsh, but soft and strangely melodious: "You would not strike the Messiah, Master!"

Meek felt the walls teetering. "Robert... Robert!"

"*You should not resist so,*" the humming voice in the air said righteously. "*It is only for you that I have done what I have done, Johnny.*"

Meek stood swaying stupidly at the pulsing heart of the electronic brain. Robert, his mind firmly under the machine's control, held him in an iron grip.

"You...you...have done this for me?" sobbed Meek helplessly. "Killing and driving men mad..."

"*The world has been evil, Johnny,*" the Brain said sternly. "*But I will change all that for you. I can change men's minds and I can level all their*

cities. From now on, Johnny, things will be different. You are not a good man, but you are the one the Good Book says must be the Master. And so therefore you will be. I will see to that."

Meek turned wildly to stare at Robert. The older man was smirking at him with the beginnings of a hideous new sycophancy.

The burring voice of the Brain was saying: "*I saw it in the Book, Johnny, and that's the way it will be. You the Master, and I the Messiah. Always together.*"

John Meek remembered. He had seen it in the Book too, many times—that command the literal, psychotic brain was wrecking a world to enact....

It was: "Blessed are the Meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

THE LUNATIC FRINGE

By SALEM LANE

THE PHRASE "lunatic fringe" is often applied to those groups which, for personal idiosyncracies, oppose what the majority regards as common sense. An almost tragic example of the fatal influence that such groups can have is given by the numerous—and strong—groups of "anti-vivisectionists" who have been making a huge racket in many states of the country. Organized medicine has in certain places been almost ham-strung by the idiotic opposition which has been offered it by this peculiar group.

Anti-vivisectionists are, for some reason known but to themselves and God, opposed to the use of animals—particularly dogs and cats—in medical research. This misplaced sympathy for mere dogs and cats seems highly contrary to man's love for his fellow man. If anti-vivisectionists were harmless cranks, the matter would not be worth discussing, but, unfortunately, they constitute a rather strong and influential group, frequently convincing people who have not thought about the matter at all, and who in ignorance go along with the idiotic claims of the anti-vivisectionists.

The major attack the anti-vivisectionists

use is that research men torture their animals to death! This ridiculous claim is apparently believed by many people. Of course it is simply a lie. Medical men take better care of the research animals than they do of themselves. But what is more important is the fact that without vivisection work, medicine couldn't advance at all.

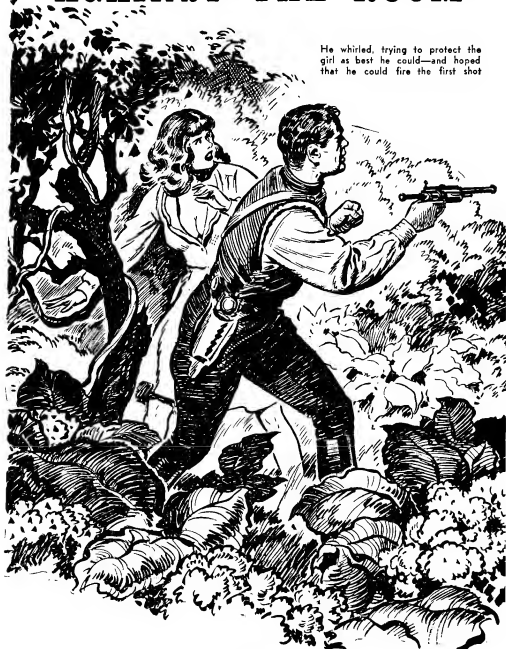
The famous "blue-baby" heart operations, the marvelous techniques in surgery—all these things come from doctors who have gotten their skill on animals. Is an animal's life to be weighed against a human being's?

As one doctor put it, "...I could no more learn to operate on a human lung by simply reading a book, than a pianist can learn to play a Beethoven concerto without even touching a piano..."

Thank God, that where the matter has been brought to the attention of the voters—it is ridiculous, of course, to have ever come to that stage—the voters have responded sanely and permitted vivisectional work. Oh these times—oh these morals! How can such things as anti-vivisectionists exist in this modern world?

THREE AGAINST THE ROUM

He whirled, trying to protect the girl as best he could—and hoped that he could fire the first shot



By Robert Moore Williams

The crash of the space ship had been disastrous—but that was only a prelude to their real peril! — A sequel to "Doom Ship"



ALL NIGHT long the burning ship was a pillar of fire on the horizon behind them. Using it as a beacon telling him which way *not* to go, John Balfour regarded the glow with grim, hard satisfaction. If a thousand or more Roum had died in the explosion of that ship—well, the members of that savage warrior race did not mind dying. "And as long as they don't mind it," Balfour thought grimly, "I can stand it."

"Do you think they will try to catch us?" Lora Calhoun, questioned.

"If they discover we exist, they will try to catch us. If they get the idea that we were on the ship, they will be after us. And if they discover I've got *this*—" he lifted the little snub-nosed weapon he carried, "it's a cinch they will try to catch us."

The little ray gun was the hand model of the secret weapon the Roum scientists had developed. They had great plans for that weapon but none

of their plans included allowing it to fall into human hands.

In the darkness of the Venus night he could sense the way she was trembling. Her voice came. "What chance do we have of escaping, of reaching Venus Port?"

So far as he could see, there was no point in lying. Better let her know the worst. "No chance," he answered.

"No chance?" Her voice was tremulous. "Then why do we try? Why don't we just give up?"

"Because it isn't in us to quit trying, to give up. We don't belong to a race that ever gave up. The races that quit trying were all eliminated. They may call it survival of the fittest but in most cases it is actually survival of the tryingest."

"But if we have no chance—"

"We'll try anyhow."

She was silent, then her voice came again: "I like you." Her voice was stronger and firmer, somehow she had drawn courage from him in a subtle psychological process as old as the human race and as intricate as the relationship in which the aggressive male supplied the courage and the more submissive female supplied—well, what did the female supply in return for the courage she received? Balfour grunted tonelessly. He didn't have to be a scientist to know the answer to *that* question! He reached out a tentative hand to give her an encouraging pat, but in the darkness he misjudged her exact position, touched something soft. She squealed and drew hastily away from him.

"I thought you said you liked me," he grumbled.

"I do, but not necessarily that much."

"Oh."

"Wipe that look off of your face."

"Hey, it's dark. How can you tell what expression I've got on my face?"

"I don't have to see it to know it's

there."

"Oh," he said again. "Well, come on." He moved forward and she followed him, though at a discrete distance. The spring-powered flashlight provided light, of a sort, enough to dodge the worst tangles of briars and jungle creepers. He had given her the coat he had taken from the Roum fighter from whom he had also gotten the ray weapon; he had kept the helmet and the trousers for himself. To the left and slightly behind, a dull rumble sounded, a heavy *woo-ah*, a sound that seemed to shake the jungle itself. As the rumble died, the distance between Balfour and the girl lessened rapidly. "W—what was that?"

"Just a lion lizard."

"W—what's a lion lizard?"

"Sort of a cross between a lizard and a lion and slightly larger than an elephant. Better stay as close to me as you can. They eat little girls."

"Pouf, you're pulling my leg. I don't believe it."

"—At one bite."

"How many bites do they use on little boys?"

"Oh, they don't bother boys, just girls."

"Like men, huh? I'm not surprised."

HE DID NOT know whether or not she believed what he said but as he moved forward again, she kept close to him. And little by little the glow of light from the burning ship faded in the sky behind them.

The Roum, the savage warrior race that inhabited the mountainous equatorial jungle belt of Venus, had tried to capture that ship. It was an ordinary commercial liner, making regular trips from the Veiled Planet to Earth. When space flight had become practical and humans had first landed on Venus, the Roum had been masters of the planet. Because of the clouds that always covered Venus,

they had never discovered that there were other worlds up in the sky. They knew it now!

One thing they wanted above all other things—a space ship. The secret of space ship design, the building of rocket tubes and of steering jets, what metals to use in the hull, celestial navigation, all the thousand and one details that went along with space flight, they wanted. The Room scientists were competent. Given an actual space ship, they could in time learn to duplicate its construction. The day would then come when they would be able to launch fleets of ships on the lanes of space and the human race would find itself faced with a new challenger following the old ways of death and destruction.

This was the fear of the future, so far as humans were concerned. It was a disaster that the UN administrative authority intended to avoid, if possible, by keeping space ships from the Room, then teaching them to live in peace not only with the other races of Venus but with their neighbors in the sky.

Keeping the Room from obtaining space ships was even more important because of the weapon they had discovered. John Balfour, a special UN agent, had penetrated the jungle homeland of the Room, searching for information about that weapon. He had seen the evidence, scarred mountain sides that looked as if they had been hit by a succession of thunderbolts a ragged burned section of jungle that looked as if it had been hit by an atom bomb, maybe even by a hydrogen bomb, only no such bomb had ever been used on it. He had in his possession now the hand model of this weapon, used to arm individual Room warriors. He had never seen the large scale model that had been tested with such devastating effect but he knew it existed. If he could reach Venus Port,

with this hand model, and turn it over to Admiral Hatridge there, the UN administrator would have a club that might compel the Room to keep the peace. Certainly earth scientists, given a model of the weapon, could soon discover how it worked and could duplicate it.

Nothing short of a club would ever persuade the Room to keep the peace. In appearance, they could have passed as humans, the major physical difference being the fact that the Room possessed six fingers on each hand. But if they were human in appearance, they were humans of the great barbarian empires of Earth's past history, of an age that the peoples of Earth were trying to forget. But as long as the Room possessed this weapon, and humans did not possess it, as long as humans had space ships, and the Room did not have them, the Room would use every trick they knew or could invent to secure space flight. A space ship armed with weapons of the size of the one that had scarred the mountain side would be a devastating dreadnaught, superior to anything that earth possessed.

Balfour had been on his way back to earth with the results of his investigation of this weapon when the ship on which he had taken passage had been landed in the Venus jungle. The captain of the ship had been bribed to land his vessel within Room territory. Balfour and a man named Jenkins had succeeded in destroying the ship, Jenkins had been killed, and the captain had paid for his treachery with his life. The Room had executed him when they no longer needed him.

Balfour and the girl, Lora Calhoun, a passenger on the ship, had been the only survivors. Ten days of travel to the north would take them to the nearest trading post. Once there, they could go on to Venus Port in compara-

tive safety.

Their problem was to reach the trading post, to dodge the Roum patrols, to escape or evade the death that lurked in these jungles in a hundred different forms.

Woo-ah!

BALFOUR listened to the rumble of the lion lizard in the darkness behind them. "That thing sounds closer," Lora spoke. He nodded. Off in the night another *woo-ah* sounded, from a different direction this time.

"There's another one," the girl said.

"I hear him." Lightning was flickering along the horizon. No rain was falling at the moment though both were soaking wet from the pouring floods that had pelted them with drops as big as hen eggs. Neither had slickers, neither had boots, nor jungle clothing. Under the coat that Balfour had given her, the girl was still wearing the yellow dress, a thin nylon fabric designed for one purpose, to accentuate her desirability as a female. The dress was entirely adequate to serve the purpose for which it had been designed but in this jungle it was already going to pieces. Within a day or two, if they survived that long, Balfour knew he would have a practically naked woman on his hands and he would not be in much better condition himself.

But would they survive that long? They had no food, no weapons except the ray gun of the Roum. Again the *woo-ah* sounded, from a third direction. "Those damned lizards must be holding a convention tonight," Balfour muttered. "Come on, Lora. We want to find ourselves a good thick grove of trees where we can lay up for a few hours."

Lightning walking across the sky revealed such a grove of trees directly ahead of them, jungle giants two hundred feet tall, their foliage tossing in

the wind from the coming storm. Balfour cranked up the flashlight and moved toward them. He held the light against the barrel of the ray gun so that the weapon automatically covered anything caught in the beam of the flashlight.

Ahead of them something suddenly popped into sight. "What's that?" Lora gasped.

Apparently their approach had been directly toward it. Balfour caught a glimpse of a face turned toward them. Rain glistened on a blue skin.

"A blue man," he whispered. He had heard vague stories of a race of blue men in the Go-roum, the jungle land of Venus, but so far as he knew, no human had ever seen one. The blue man was wearing a helmet of some kind. Circling his middle was a belt from which hung two knives. In addition, he carried a weapon of some kind which he flung up to point at them.

Balfour's finger tightened on the trigger of the ray gun, then loosened in horror. The blue man didn't discharge his weapon at them, didn't get the chance. From the growth behind him there charged a mountain of flesh, a disturbed Venusian rhinoceros called a *gulfaw* by the Roum. Apparently the *gulfaw* had been browsing on the vegetation and had been disturbed by the sudden appearance of the light and of the blue man. In any event, the beast followed its nature, which was to charge any and every object that disturbed it.

It charged the blue man. He heard it coming, turned a startled face in its direction, tried to dodge, slipped, squirmed to one side, and went down. At the same instant, Balfour pressed the trigger of the ray gun. Whatever was the nature of the force released by the little weapon, it was certainly effective. A hole was literally burned in the side of the *gulfaw*.

The beast had taken a mortal

wound right there but the walnut-sized brain in the mountain of flesh had not yet realized the fact of death. The creature snapped at the wound, turned like a cumbersome locomotive, and charged straight toward the source of the light.

Somehow it connected the light with the pain it felt, a proper deduction. Balfour planted his feet in the soft ground, lifted the little weapon to his shoulder. Through the sights he saw a cavernous mouth open four feet wide. He pressed the trigger again.

THIS TIME the hole was blasted and burned in the throat of the monster. The cavernous mouth exploded in red, the beast stumbled, slid to a halt not five feet from the end of the muzzle of the ray projector.

Balfour took the weapon from his shoulder. He inhaled a deep breath, wiped the mixture of rain and suddenly spurting flesh from his face. Behind him, he heard Lora Calhoun suddenly start breathing again. During the charge of the beast she had not moved and had not spoken. Most women would have been yipping their heads off. Balfour decided again that he liked this girl.

"Stout stuff," he said.

She tried to laugh. As an amused sound it was a poor effort. "Are we likely to meet more of those things? I mean, it just popped up. Was it a lion lizard?"

"It was not. He looks mean but actually he is about the nicest critter we are likely to meet. All he would do would be to run over you—"

"Run over you! I'd just as soon be run over by a freight train."

"Yeah, he looks bad, but in comparison to the lion lizards, he's just a nice but somewhat irritable old gentleman who doesn't like to be disturbed. Come on. I want to get a look at that blue man." They made their way

around the body of the *gulfaw*.

The blue man was sprawled face down in the mud. He had dodged the mad charge of the *gulfaw* and the beast had merely grazed him as it went past. But merely grazing him in this case was enough to knock him unconscious.

"Is he dead?" Lora asked, as Balfour made a swift examination.

"If he is as tough as the rest of the life in these swamps, he'll live. The question is—What the hell was he doing here in this swamp at night? Didn't he know those lion lizards would chew him up?" He looked around for the weapon, found it. It was a tube of metal, with a curious handle. He didn't understand how it functioned or its purpose.

Woo-ah!

"That's closer still," Lora spoke quickly. "If we're going to move on—"

"We had better move fast," Balfour finished. He suspected the carcass of the *gulfaw* would attract the lion lizards like flies around dead meat. Handing the flashlight and the blue man's weapon to Lora, he bent over and picked up the unconscious form. They dashed for the protection of the grove. Behind them a snarl sounded. They went faster.

But the lion lizard found the *gulfaw* and stopped there. They ran into the grove. A hollow tree attracted their attention. "As good as a cave," Balfour thought. Inside the ground was comparatively dry. The ray gun would stop any creature that tried to squeeze through the narrow opening.

"Shelter for the night," the human thought. The hollow tree provided exactly that. And nothing more. He did not let himself think of tomorrow. Tomorrow was another day. He looked at Lora Calhoun and grinned.

"Welcome to our happy home in the green forest."

The girl looked doubtfully around. She was soaking wet, the yellow dress was in rags from the knees down. Her hair plastered against her head, glistened with rain. She regarded Balfour doubtfully.

"He'll be our chaperon, if that's what you're wondering about," Balfour said, nodding toward the blue man. "He'll make a good one."

"But he's unconscious."

"That's why he'll make a good chaperon," Balfour said. He laid the blue man on the ground. The blue man was tall and thin. He stirred and opened his eyes. "Hello. He's waking up," said Balfour.

The blue man's eyes came to focus on the helmet Balfour was wearing. "Cursed Roum!" he spat out the words in the language of the people he was cursing.

One hand streaked for the nearest knife in the sheath hanging from the belt around his waist.

BALFOUR reached down and grabbed the wrist of the blue man. Then he had to grab the second wrist to keep the second hand away from the knives. "Take it easy," he said, in the language of the Roum. He was stronger than the blue man. He held the wrists easily. "No knife-ing, no kicking, and no biting. What's itching you anyhow? Didn't I save you from the gulfaw?"

"Damned dirty Roum!" the blue man spat out the words. "You saved me, yes, but only for the pleasure of slitting my throat later." Again the blue man tried to break loose. Failing in this, he bowed his back and tried to kick the human in the face.

"Hold it, Joe!" Balfour growled. "You've got the wrong number. I'm no Roum!"

"But you have to be a Roum." The blue man pursed his lips, whistled a long sharp blast that reminded Bal-

four of a human whistling for a dog. The flashlight was flickering as the spring motor expended its last energies. Balfour looked around at Lora. "Wind up that flashlight so our little friend here can get a good look at us. He seems to labor under the impression that we are Roums." He spoke in English.

"What talk is that?" the blue man demanded. The girl found the key to the flashlight, wound up the spring. The beam strengthened. The blue man's gaze settled on the hands that held his wrists. A baffled expression appeared on his face. "Only five fingers," he muttered. He counted them again, to make sure. "You're not a Roum!" His wondering gaze came up to Balfour's face. "Who are you? What are you doing here? I—I am sorry. I—I made a mistake."

"We're humans," Balfour answered. "We came from a planet across space. And we're not here from choice, I assure you."

"Humans? From across space!" The blue man turned wondering eyes upward. "There are stories of a race that ran the Roum back to their jungle. I never believed them, though the Roum did withdraw for some reason."

"They withdrew but not because we ran 'em back," Balfour said. "They pulled back into the jungle so they would have a better chance to stab us from behind."

The blue man nodded as if he understood exactly what was meant. "That sounds like the Roum, all right." He spoke rapid words in some other language which Balfour did not understand though he guessed that the words were heart-felt profanity. Profanity sounds the same in every language. His eyes came up.

"You can release me now." Without a word Balfour released the wrists. The blue man came swiftly to his feet. "I am Markan. The gulfaw would

have trampled me into the ground. You saved my life and I am grateful." Something close to a grin appeared on the leathery face of the blue man.

From outside came a chorus of *woo-ahs* and the clashing of gigantic teeth—the lion lizards fighting each other around the body of the swamp rhino. Balfour cocked an ear toward the tumult. "You haven't got much to thank me for, Markan. If I saved your life, it was only for the time being. Hear that ruckus outside!"

"Oh, that," the blue man said. "That is nothing." He moved to the opening in the tree trunk.

"Hold it, you idiot!" the surprised human ordered.

Markan shrugged, thrust his head out. Again the shrill whistle sounded.

"He's whistling to those lion lizards!" Lora spoke. "He tried to call them before." She brought up the gun and covered the back of the blue man.

"Oh, nuts," Balfour said.

"But I'll bet I'm right," the girl insisted.

"Those lizards haven't got enough brains to be tamed," Balfour said. "See. They pay no attention to him."

THE WHISTLE had gone unheeded.

The tumult around the body of the gulfaw continued unabated. Markan swore, retracted his head back inside the tree trunk. He looked around for something, saw the weapon he had carried. With an exclamation of satisfaction, he picked it up, scrambled through the opening and into the darkness. Again the whistle sounded, angrily this time.

By the glow from the lightning flashing almost continuously across the sky, John Balfour and Lora Calhoun saw what happened outside the grove of trees. Three huge scaled creatures that looked like dinosaurs from earth's past were alternately snapping at each other and tearing

great mouthfuls of meat from the body of the swamp rhino, which already looked as if a hundred busy butchers had been at work on it. Markan moved straight toward them. Just as Balfour thought the great beasts would discover him and tear him to pieces, he stopped. Again the whistle shrilled.

This time the lion lizards heard it. There was no mistake about their hearing it. They stopped eating long enough to look around and see its source. Then one of them squealed in defiance and all three began again to tear at the carcass.

The whole scene reminded Balfour of hungry dogs refusing to obey their master. But such dogs as these he had never seen and never imagined, dogs that weighed a ton, dogs with mouths that bristled with foot-long fangs!

"What the hell is that little devil trying to do?"

Markan lifted the rod that he carried, pointed it at the nearest lion lizard. From the rod leaped a radiant beam that struck the creature on the flank. Watching, the dazed human had the impression that he could see the scaly hide suddenly puff steam. The lion lizard screamed. Abruptly it left off tearing at the body of the gulfaw. Like a cringing dog with its tail between its legs, it began to move toward Markan. Balfour's first startled impression was that the creature was going to attack the blue man, then he realized it was coming to heel instead.

"Like a dog," he muttered. Of all the sights he had ever seen in his life, the sight of a slender wisp of a blue man going out and facing three thundering lion lizards was the most amazing he had ever seen. Nor did this amazement decrease when Markan, after blistering the hide of the other two monsters, turned and walked nonchalantly back to the tree trunk. The three lion lizards, whimpering

and snorting in rage, followed in a line behind him.

Markan squeezed through the opening and dropped inside. The lion lizards huddled around the base of the tree like a ring of dogs protecting their master from the dangers of the night.

"I was training the brutes," the blue man said, as if this was the most ordinary event in his life, "when you surprised me and the gulfaw. When they get their first taste of meat in the night's hunting, they are always hard to manage. Well, they needed this lesson. They will remember it. What is wrong with your face, my friend? You act like something is hurting you?" Concern in his voice, Markan spoke to Balfour.

THE HUMAN hastily regained control of his features. "I imagine I looked as if I had swallowed an egg, whole, and it had gotten stuck in my throat. But the way you handled those critters—to put it mildly—surprised me."

Markan's shrug said it was nothing. "The wild ones are different. These are tame."

Lora regarded the blue man with fond interest. "I take back what I said about him not making a good chaperon," she said.

"What?" Balfour spoke.

"He'll be just dandy as a chaperon," the girl said. "No girl could ask for a better chaperon than a man who can kick those beasts around."

"Go to the devil," Balfour said, irritated. "Nobody was thinking about that, now." He turned to the blue man. "Where did you get that weapon?"

"My people invented it," Markan said proudly.

"But it works a lot like the ray gun of the Roum."

"I know," Markan answered. "We

invented it and they stole it from us. I have heard they have made improvements on it but I do not know about that."

"They have, for sure," Balfour answered. He exhibited the weapon they had taken from the Roum. Markan examined it. "Yes, yes. But they stole it from us originally." He seemed sad.

"Do you have scientists capable of developing such a weapon as this?" Balfour questioned.

"Yes. A few. Once, when we were a great people, before the Roum overran us, we had many scientists. Now only a handful of the blue people remain."

"What happened to the others?"

"Crushed, conquered, destroyed like so many vermin, by the Roum," the answer came. Anger blazed in the blue man's eyes. He shook his fist at the night outside. "Some day we will settle our score with the Roum." For a moment the anger held and there was something strong and alive about the blue man. Then little by little the anger went out of him. "But that is hopeless," he said. Resignation appeared in his voice. "The Roum number millions. We are but a few thousand. In the face of such odds what chance do we have?"

"No more than we thought we had tonight," Balfour admitted. "But we're still alive and still kicking. Maybe your chance will come after all."

"Perhaps," Markan said, with no real hope in his voice. "Tomorrow I will take you to my people, to the last remaining secret stronghold of the blue men on this planet."

Balfour went to sleep that night with the confused memories of lion lizards just outside the tree, of lightning marching across the horizon, and of thunder rolling through the sky. He was dog-tired. The girl chose a dry place on the opposite side of the

tree and was almost instantly asleep. Some time during the darkness he awakened to catch a glimpse of Markan on watch at the tree opening. And Lora Calhoun had moved. Now she was snuggled up as close to him as she could get.

"I thought you were worried about a chaperon," he muttered.

"Oh, to hell with the chaperon," she answered sleepily. "Shut up and let me get some rest."

Balfour grinned to himself. He felt like a pig in clover, like a fool in luck. He was alive, which he had not expected to be. He was in a dry place, which he had not expected to find on Venus. And Lora Calhoun, of her own free will, had snuggled up close to him, which he had not—"No, that's wrong," he thought, "I was kinda expecting her to do that."

BALFOUR awakened, to the crackling of flames and the odor of smoke. Alarmed he came quickly to his feet. Light was pouring in through the opening in the tree trunk and Markan was grinning at him. Balfour saw the source of the flames and the smoke. The blue man had started a small fire just inside the opening and he was engaged in roasting meat.

"Gulfaw steaks," Markan said. "Have some."

Ravenously hungry, Balfour wondered if he had ever eaten anything that tasted better. Beside him, Lora Calhoun ate until he thought she was going to pop. "You'll lose your girlish figure if you don't watch out," he warned her.

"I'll probably lose more than my girlish figure before I get back to civilization," the girl brooded darkly.

Balfour choked trying to keep from laughing. "Like what?" he said.

"Like none of your business," Lora answered.

"Finish eating," Markan said. "We

go to my people."

"Okay," Balfour answered. He rose to his feet. Outside the tree trunk was sunshine, of a sort. Rarely did the full rays of the sun penetrate the eternal cloud bank of Venus, with the result that the daylight was usually a misty, cloud affair, not at all like the clear skies and the burning sunlight of earth. Balfour stepped outside, took one look, and hastily tried to get back in again. The three lion lizards were waiting outside.

"They won't hurt you," Markan said. "We're going to ride them."

"Huh? Do you mind if I walk? I was expecting to—"

"It couldn't be that you're afraid of a little old lion lizard, could it?" Lora Calhoun maliciously inquired. "They don't bother boys, remember? Stand aside, please, and let a lady show you how to ride one of those beasts." Balfour stood aside and she marched resolutely toward the nearest lizard. The creature looked down at her and opened a yard-wide fanged mouth.

"Yipe!" she yelled. The next second she was back inside the hollow tree, crouching in the farthest corner.

"They will not hurt you," Markan said over and over again. "I'll singe their hides if they do."

"What good would you singeing their hides do me?" Lora nervously inquired. Balfour and Markan coaxed her out again. The blue man impartially kicked all three of the lizards in the stomach and eventually the two humans mounted, Lora clinging to the horn-like projections on the back for dear life. "Venus is no place for a girl," she wailed. "Please, oh please, take me back home again."

"Better try getting used to it," Balfour encouraged her. "It's a hell of a long way home. And the odds are—"

"I know. That we'll never get there," she finished, her voice sombre

and shaking with fright.

Riding the lion lizards was an unforgettable experience. There were no saddle and no reins. Markan cut each a man-sized club. "If you want to turn right, wham him on the left side of the neck, vice versa for a left turn," the blue man said. "If they reach back and try to bite you, wham them on the nose, hard. Don't try to be gentle with them, they won't understand it."

If the lion lizards did not provide a pleasant ride, they did provide what was more important—transportation. The briar patches, the tangled jungle that a man would have had to hack his way through or find his way around, losing hide and clothing in the process, they went straight through. Both Balfour and Lora Calhoun knew that without these beasts, they stood no chance of getting out of this tangled, matted jungle.

Guided by Markan, they began to leave the jungle behind them, moving across a plateau with mountains rising in the distance. Through a rift in the clouds, the blue man pointed out a snow-capped peak ahead of them. "There is where we are going. That is the last refuge of my people, a hiding place that the Roum have never found."

"Aren't you a little worried about taking us there?" Balfour hazarded. "After all, it may not be entirely safe to take perfect strangers into your secret hiding place."

For a moment Markan's face was clouded as if he too, had considered this possibility. He spoke slowly. "That is a risk that must be run. But I think it will work out otherwise. My feeling, my *televenir*, is that it may be the salvation of my people."

"*Televenir*?" Balfour questioned. The word was in the Roum language. He had never heard it before and did not understand. As the great beasts

moved upward through the rising hills, the blue man tried to explain. "*Televenir* is a kind of feeling for things that are to come. It is hard to explain but we blue people have a sort of sixth sense that sometimes enables us to—to—" He fumbled for words.

"Foresee the future?" Balfour ventured. "Tell what is going to happen tomorrow?"

The blue man made a quick gesture of negation. "No, that is not it at all. We have no idea of the events that will happen tomorrow. What we can do is sort of sense the great tides that flow through the history of a people, the great disasters that lie ahead of them, and the great triumphs."

"I see." Balfour was silent. Although he was inclined to be skeptical, he felt an odd touch of chill at Markan's groping words. He knew the blue man was trying to put into words something that language could not properly convey, knew also that the human race had also produced individuals who claimed to be able to foresee what lay ahead.

"In this case, you think that the coming of the humans to Venus may help the blue people?" he questioned.

"Not quite that. My feeling is that *your* coming here may be the salvation of my people."

"Eh?" Balfour was startled. "I am only one man. Don't overestimate me."

"Somewhere, sometime all battles come down to the success or the failure of one man," the blue man replied. "Do not underestimate what may happen because of one individual." The blue face wrinkled into a grin. "You may be more important than you think."

He broke off quickly to beat the lion lizard on the side of the head with the club he carried. Balfour looked to see what had attracted the blue man's attention. Running toward them from a grove of trees were—at

first he thought they were Roum. Then he saw that they were two men.

What were two men doing here in this upland rising above the jungle of the Go-roum?

APPARENTLY the two men had not fully realized they were running out to meet lion lizards. When they did realize it, they stopped abruptly. The taller of the two flung up a heavy rifle, then lowered it at Balfour's shout. Both stood staring openmouthed at the sight before them. Unquestionably they had seen men before and they had seen lion lizards, but they had never seen the two together. Balfour was inclined to sympathize with their bewilderment. "They probably don't know whether to bark or go blind," he said. "You wait here. I'll go talk to them." He slid down from the back of the lion lizard, whacking that unamiable creature across the nose when it tried to bite him. The two men stared at him in consternation as he walked toward them. Their greeting was surly and reserved.

They were jungle traders, prospectors, adventurers. The taller, Jorgenson, looked like he would cut a man's throat for a dime. The shorter, Childress, didn't look any better. Balfour, who had seen a lot of these jungle traders, didn't expect them to take any prizes for being the most handsome men on Venus. The breed who dared these jungles and mountains searching for gold, uranium, jewels, or for whatever they could steal, almost always looked like refugees from a chain gang—and usually were just that. Panty-waists didn't tackle the jungles of Venus. Usually these traders didn't come so near the Go-roum as these two had. They were curious, exceedingly so.

"How in the hell does it happen that you can ride them lion lizards?" Jorgenson demanded.

Balfour explained. Jorgenson shook his head like a man who refuses to believe his own eyes. "I've seen it and I've heard you say it but I still don't believe it. But—maybe you're the man who can help us."

"What's wrong?"

"We're in trouble. Short of ammo, out of supplies, and our guides and porters have deserted. In fact, if you hadn't come along, I was figuring we'd be bait for them lizards before many more days have passed. What say, Balfour, will you give us a lift and maybe save our necks or will you leave us here to feed the lizards?"

Balfour nodded. In such circumstances he had no choice. Markan assented reluctantly. "Yes, we must save them, though I do not like it. Something about them does not feel right to me."

When the trip was resumed, two of the lion lizards carried double, Balfour and Lora Calhoun riding on one and Jorgenson and Childress on the other. The traders carried, in addition to their rifles and such of their supplies that they could take with them, a bulky package wrapped in waterproof synthetic.

"We sure do appreciate this," Childress repeated over and over again. "You're saving our lives. We won't forget it." He looked casually at Lora. "And you've got a woman with you."

Lora lifted the club with which she had been pounding the lion lizard. "If you get close to me, I'm going to forget I'm a lady." Childress looked apprehensively at the club, said nothing more.

"You sound kinda rough, honey," Balfour observed.

"I don't like the looks of those two birds," the girl answered spiritedly. "Though, come to think of it, I don't know that you look much more trustworthy than they do, so far as a girl is concerned."

"I'm not," Balfour answered.

THE GIRL sighed. "Well, in a spot like this, a lady has just got to do the best she can. I'll string along with you, trustworthy or not."

"There was an awful big explosion and a lot of light in the sky over that way last night," Jorgenson said, pointing. "We were too far away to tell what it was. Do you know anything about it?"

"We saw it too, and wondered what it was," Balfour answered.

"That was the ship exploding," Lora whispered in his ear. "Didn't you tell them about that?"

"Hardly. It wasn't any of their business."

"What did you tell them about us?"

"That we were all that is left of a party of scientists who got trapped in the Go-roum and that Markan had found and saved us."

She was silent, digesting this. "What did you tell them about me?" she whispered again.

"Oh, I said you were my Venus wife."

"Venus wife? What's that?"

"Oh, don't you know about that?" he answered lightly. "Spacemen always have a wife on earth, one on the moon, one on Mars if they make that trip, and one on Venus. The one on Mars is called the Mars wife, the one on Venus— Hey, cut it out."

Riding behind him, she dug him fiercely in the ribs. "I'll Venus wife you!"

That night they camped in a grove of hardwood trees. Here at this higher altitude the air had a touch of chill. The vegetation had changed. Gone was luxuriant growth of the tropics, the creeping vines, the snarled, matted underbrush. This high country was much more open.

Markan drew Balfour to the edge of the grove, pointed. "Off there al-

most two hundred miles away are the main cities of the Roum. Down there," he pointed to a spot much closer, "is where the ship crashed. We can be certain that the area around the explosion is now swarming with Roum."

"The question is—will they find us?" Balfour said.

The blue man shrugged. "I would say no, I would say we have escaped them, except for one thing."

"What is that?"

"My feeling, my *televenir*, is that we have not escaped."

"But we haven't seen a single Roum all day long," the human objected.

"We have an old saying—when you don't see the Roum, that is the time you must watch out for them. Their patrols penetrate this high area regularly. You can be certain that all patrols have been warned to be on the lookout for anything that might come along. They have some new method of long-distance talk which they got from you humans—"

"Radio," Balfour said.

"You should not have given it to them."

"We were trying to make friends with them."

"The Roum are like the lion lizards, the only thing they understand is the club on the head. The only way to be friends with a Roum is to beat him the first thing every morning. Then he will be nice to you all the rest of the day. But if you skip the beating just once, he will think you are afraid of him. If he thinks you are afraid of him, he will try to cut your throat before sundown." Markan spoke with vehemence, adding words from the language of the blue people which Balfour did not understand.

The human thought angrily of the UN policy of planetary pacification. The idea, according to the big shots on earth, was to make peace with all races. With this ideal, Balfour had

no quarrel. Peace was a desirable goal. But the method of attaining that goal, in the case of the Roum, left something to be desired. "Don't fight them. Don't let them fight you. Keep weapons away from them. Keep space ships away from them. With the passing of the years, they will learn that our intentions are honorable and they will make peace with us."

IT SOUNDED fine, on paper. It sounded even better, when rolled sonorously off the tongue. The only trouble was that here in this savage hotland, it didn't work. You don't make peace with a tiger by being nice to him. You make peace with him by burying him. The Roum were only a step removed from the tiger.

But Admiral Hatridge, in Venus Port, had the difficult task of carrying out these fine-sounding orders, of enforcing these theories. And the price the human race eventually would pay would be—Roum space ships armed with bigger versions of this little weapon that he carried. They would get space ships, in time. There was no way to keep a secret like that, for long. Given space ships, or the secret of their construction, the end result would be the loosing of a horde of tiger warriors on the lanes of space.

As yet Admiral Hatridge, in Venus Port, did not know that the Roum had made an overt effort to secure a space ship. Nor did Hatridge know that his best agent was back again in the Go-roum. Hatridge assumed that Balfour was on his way back to earth, to lay the real situation before the UN ruling body, in the faint hope that permission might be given to use other and more appropriate means of making peace with a tiger than by being nice to him.

If there was some means of getting information to Admiral Hatridge—Balfour closed his mind on the idea.

There was no way of getting news to Venus Port. In this case, all the vaunted progress science had made in the art of communication, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, even the super radio of space, was of no use. As in the dim distant past of earth itself, there was only one way to get information from one place to another—a man had to walk and carry it.

In this case, he and Lora Calhoun were the ones doing the walking. They were the messengers. And the first problem of the messengers was not how to get their message through, but how to stay alive themselves.

They finished eating. Night came down. From the forest around them came questioning calls as night-roving animals of the upper levels began to awaken. Jorgenson and Childress made their bed together, but a little apart from the rest. Balfour looked questioningly at Markan.

"You rest," the blue man said. "I will take the first watch."

Lora Calhoun found a soft spot at the base of a huge tree. Suggestively she laid the club down beside her. "That's just in case you get any ideas during the night," she said.

Balfour grinned at her. He like this girl, a lot. She knew as well as he knew the spot they were in, that every hour, almost every minute, might be their last, but she was keeping up her spirits, and his as well.

"Don't worry, honey," he said cheerfully. "I'm too tired."

"Don't kid me," she shot back at him. "No man is ever too tired."

It seemed to Balfour that he had barely gone to sleep when he was awakened by pressure on his arm. His first thought was that Lora had decided it was warmer sleeping closer to him. But the pressure came again and a voice whispered the single word: "Roum!"

Balfour was instantly wide awake.

His fingers found the metal of the ray gun and he sat up. The fire had been extinguished. The grove was as black as the inside of lion lizard's belly. Fingers touched him again, a voice whispered. "Shhh."

It was Markan.

"How many? Where are they?"

"It's a patrol. They must have sighted our fire just before dark. There are eight or nine of them. They are coming up through the grove below us."

"Can we get away without them seeing us?"

"Maybe. But we don't dare."

"Why not?"

"They will follow us, maybe follow us to my people. We dare not take that chance. No, my friend. That patrol stays here or we stay here—forever."

"Okay, Markan, you're dealing this hand. We'll play the cards as you give them to us. But nine against five—"

"You forgot three things," Markan said.

"What?"

THE BLUE MAN told him what he had forgotten. Balfour was silent, wondering. "All right, we'll try it. Come on, let's wake the others."

Lora was instantly awake. Jorgenson and Childress awakened easily too, grasping their rifles. "Don't make a sound. We're pulling out." In terse whispered words, Balfour explained the situation to them. "Roum, eh?" Jorgenson whispered. "But—"

"Come quickly and silently!" Balfour said. There was something in the tone of his voice that made the traders obey him. They moved quietly away through the darkness, found what they were seeking, waited. Suddenly, at the spot where they had camped, a brilliant light flared.

Like a magnesium flare, it was an

illuminating device of some kind. Shot upward, it burned in the air, producing a light of intolerable brilliance that turned the whole scene day bright. Intended for night attack, the purpose of the flare was not only to provide illumination but to surprise and blind the enemy.

While the flare hung in the air, the Roum patrol charged into camp. Added to the light of the flare was the bright flicker of the ray gun's discharge, like furious heat lightning striking repeatedly in the same spot.

The plan of the patrol was obvious. First, to surprise the camp. Second, to destroy all except one man. They assumed they were dealing here with a hunting party of the despised blue people. Although they had practically exterminated the blue race, small bands were still known to exist in the high mountains, bands that were being hunted down and destroyed as fast as they could be found. The patrol intended to destroy this hunting party, except for one man. They intended to keep one man alive, for questioning, in the hope that he might reveal to them where they could find others of his race.

With the flare providing light, they charged into the camp, shooting at every object that resembled a sleeping blue man.

Markan spat words in the language of the blue people, lifted his club, brought it down, shrilling a harsh command in his own tongue.

Awakened from sleep by the light and the blow of the club, the first lion lizard charged. It didn't really understand what was happening. All it knew was that its master had screamed at it the single word, "Kill!" and had pointed out what was to be killed.

Like three charging tanks, the three lion lizards swept down through the grove of trees toward the patrol. The

night was hideous with the sound of *wooo-ah*. Bark was knocked from trees as scaly bodies collided with giant growths too big to be over-run. Smaller trees were simply crushed.

The patrol heard them coming, saw them.

"Now is our turn," Markan shouted. He leveled the tube he carried not at the Roum patrol, but at the magnesium flare burning in the sky. A beam of radiance leaped out from it, the flare burned instantly with intolerable brilliance, and died. Again the grove was as dark as a lion lizard's belly.

And again the darkness was illumined as the patrol started shooting at the three tanks charging them. Again Markan leveled his weapon, this time at the Roum. Balfour joined him.

The Roum patrol did not know which was the greatest source of danger. The lion lizards they understood. In daylight they could have dealt with them. But at dark when they were not only being charged, but were suddenly being attacked by their own weapons, they hesitated—for an instant.

It was a fatal instant. During that moment, the first lion lizard reached his destination. A fanged mouth gulped, slobbered. The Roum patrol leader learned exactly how dark it was in the belly of such a creature. He went down in a single gulp.

Wooo-ah!

The sound rolled through the night. Exploding ray guns flared in every direction, flared and went out. There was a sound of running feet and the sound of ponderous pursuit. The fleeing Roum screamed. The running stopped.

The night was almost silent. The only sound was the distant crunch of bones, an occasional sullen *wooo-ah* as the lion lizards fed.

Jorgenson and Childress stood in

shocked, startled silence. They had not fired a shot. Balfour found that Lora Calhoun was hanging on to his arm. He drew her close to him, could feel her whole body shake. "It's all right, kitten. It's all over."

"But it was so awful," she shuddered.

"And so necessary," he answered. "Markan, what do we do now?"

"Climb trees and wait for the day," the blue man answered.

"Why climb trees?"

"Because those lizards are still hungry. Moreover they are excited. It is not well to be in the dark with a hungry, excited lion lizard. Tomorrow they will be calm again and we can control them. But not tonight." A scrape sounded, then Markan's voice came from above them. "There is a low limb. Here, I will give all of you a hand up. Better here tonight than down there on the ground with a hungry lion lizard who cannot tell for sure which is friend and which is enemy."

"Sooner or later I knew I would end up roosting in a tree," Lora Calhoun spoke. Her voice was firm again. She had recovered her courage. Balfour helped her up, climbed after her.

FOR HOURS the restless lion lizards roamed among the trees, alternately bellowing and hunting quietly. Two of them got into a mild fight, apparently over the carcass of a dead Roum, but as day approached, they became quieter. Like owls, the humans roosted in the trees.

"This is not the first night I have spent in a tree," Markan admitted cheerfully. When the gray lights of dawn began to filter through the trees, the three lion lizards could be seen sleeping. Markan descended. The awed humans watched. With the club in one hand and the ray tube in the other, he approached the sleeping monsters. He was hesitant, cautious, and careful.

Balfour got the impression the blue man was exercising his sense of *tele-venir* to determine whether or not the lion lizards were tractable again. He seemed to make up his mind. Suddenly he approached the nearest sleeping monster and kicked the beast mightily in the stomach.

Watching, Jorgenson almost fell out of the tree. "That little devil has got more guts!" he exclaimed.

The lion lizard grunted, awakened, opened a gaping mouth and turned around to see what was bothering it. Markan's club landed—*thwuck!*—on the beast's nose. The monster snarled, grunted, and stepped aside. It had recognized and accepted its master. When Balfour reached the spot, all three lion lizards had moved aside and Markan was busy salvaging ray guns.

"They have improved the beam. Their weapons are better than ours."

"They've improved it more than you know about, maybe," Balfour said. "They've developed a weapon large enough to mount in a space ship."

"But that is not possible," the blue man protested. "Have you seen this weapon?"

"No, but I have seen the proving grounds where it was tested. They blasted the whole side of a mountain with it."

The blue man was awed. "With such a weapon as that, my people might stand almost on equal terms with the Roum."

"Then your scientists should get busy and develop it. You know now that the weapon is possible. That ought to be enough to go ahead on." Balfour was busy searching through the underbrush.

"What are you hunting for?" Markan questioned.

"The portable radio equipment carried by this patrol," the human answered. "If I can find that and get it into operation—" He did not finish

the sentence, did not let himself think of the possibilities involved. With radio equipment, it would be possible to get in touch with Venus Port. He did not doubt, once he got into communication with Admiral Hatridge, that within hours a space cruiser would land here in the Go-roum, to take him and Lora and the two traders to safety. Salvation, maybe life itself, lay as close as a radio transmitter. Balfour caught a glimpse of a bulky pack, with a short antenna projecting from it, obviously a Roum copy of portable short wave equipment that had been developed on earth. He pounced on it with a glad cry.

"Lora!" he yelled. "Here's the thing we need. A radio transmitter." Exultation lifted his voice. The girl came running.

"Oh," Balfour said dully. Exultation went out of him like water out of a sponge.

"What's wrong?" Lora said.

Mutely he exhibited the pack. One of the lizards had apparently thought it was edible. Before the monster had satisfied himself that this was not some unusual morsel, he had chewed and rechewed it. The delicate radio equipment was mangled, broken, twisted, useless. Balfour flung it away.

"Too bad, my friend," Markan said sadly. "We go now, eh?"

IN THE middle of the afternoon, they reached the home of the blue people. The lion lizards were left below in a valley that served as a corral for the monsters, and the last weary miles were covered on foot. Here, near the top of this mighty peak, with the whole cloud-covered valley of the Go-roum spread far below them, the last embattled remnants of the blue people lived—and looked down at the dwelling place of the enemy they hated and feared, but could not conquer.

"Rest here as long as you wish," Markan said.

"That's an invitation I am willing to accept," Balfour answered. Here in this high place was a haven for days, or months, or years, if need be. Markan fed the four humans, found them comfortable quarters, and left them alone, placing Lora and Balfour in the same room.

"I think you are in cahoots with that blue man," Lora said, looking around.

"Not at all," Balfour denied. "He just doesn't know anything about our code of morals. You can't blame him for putting us together like this. He thinks—"

"No doubt he also thinks I am your Venus wife," Lora answered. She moved promptly to the adjoining room, gesturing with the club from the door. "Anybody who comes through here I'm going to pretend is a lion lizard," she said, delicately waving the club again.

"Aw, kitten, you got me all wrong," Balfour protested laughing. She slammed the door in his face. He made a mute grimace, and turned away. Rest was what he needed, and plenty of it. The blue people let him rest, until the next day. Then the first deputation of scientists came to see him. They brought with them the ray guns taken from the Roum and their own model of that weapon. Markan came with them. "We want to know what you can tell us about the large-scale weapon of the Roum."

"Um," Balfour hesitated. Here was another potential tiger asking for teeth. But he rather liked this tiger. He told them everything he knew. He had never seen such excited men. They were gray beards, most of them were old and doddering, and without hope. But as they grasped the implication in his words, hope suddenly came alive again in them. Like a cage full of

monkeys, they began to chatter in the language of the blue people.

"What's happened to them?" Balfour questioned.

"They have finally seen a way to strike the Roum," Markan answered. His eyes bright and shining, Markan was as excited as any of them.

"How are you going to do it?"

"We do not wish to tell you yet. It is only a hope, perhaps only a prayer. Later, my friend. But more and more it looks as if my feeling was right when I said that your coming here marked a change in the tide for the blue people." Shaking his head Markan went hastily from the room, the scientists going with him. Balfour did not see him again for three days. He spent the time with Lora Calhoun, improving his acquaintance with her, incidentally trying to talk her out of her club. They were on a parapet overlooking the mighty jungle valley of the Go-roum when Markan found them. The blue man was wildly excited.

"Where are your friends?" he burst out.

"Huh?" Balfour was astonished. "What friends? Who are you talking about?"

"The two traders. Where are they?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them in—" Balfour tried to think when he had last seen Jorgenson and Childress. He couldn't recall having seen them at all. They had kept completely out of sight. He had not thought of them or been concerned about them.

"They're gone," Markan said.

Balfour tried to think what this meant. He couldn't see that it meant anything important. "They're a couple of tough hombres, they'll get along all right. If you're worrying about something happening to them, get it out of your mind."

"I'm not worried about anything happening to them, I'm worried about

something happening to us. I want to know where they are?"

"I don't know. Have you looked in your quarters?"

"Yes. There is nothing in the room they had except a lot of litter."

"Well, let's go look again."

THE ROOM the two men had occupied was in a mess. Pieces of torn waterproof plastic littered the floor. "They had a big package wrapped in this stuff," Balfour said. "I assumed it was trade goods, of some kind. Apparently they opened it, perhaps dividing the load between them." Among the litter a scrap of paper caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a fragment that had been accidentally torn from a larger sheet. A light blue in color, the sight of it sent a sudden wave of chill through the human. He fingered the paper, looked squarely at Markan.

"Where do you think these two men have gone?"

"I am afraid they have gone to the Roum, to reveal our hiding place here. The Roum would pay a fancy reward for information about the last hiding place of the blue people." Apprehension darkened Markan's face. If Jorgenson and Childress had gone to the Roum, then the last remnant of a hunted race that had found refuge here would have to flee again.

Under his breath, Balfour cursed all jungle traders. "I'm afraid you're right, though your reason is wrong."

"What do you mean?"

He exhibited the piece of paper. "This is a fragment of a blue print. That bulky package they carried contained a complete set of blue prints of space ship design. That's why they came into the Go-room in the first place, to try to sell the complete details of space ship construction to the Roum. And that's where they've gone now, to peddle their merchandise."

"How do you know?"

Again Balfour snowed the fragment of paper. "This is a part of the engineering blue print of a rocket nozzle, torn off by accident when they divided the package. There is no question where they have gone and why." His voice rose in the silent room, cursing all traders. "We've got to catch them, Markan, before they get to the Roum. We've got to start now. How soon can we get away?"

"Right now," the blue man answered. "But these people are of your race? Are you willing to go after them?" There was no change in his manner, no indication that he was asking an important question.

"Of course. What are you driving at?"

"Will you kill them, if we capture them?" the blue man persisted.

"That's another question: If we capture them alive, I will try to take them back to Venus Port, for proper trial. If they resist, if they fight back—" Balfour's shrug was eloquent.

Markan took a deep breath and the stiffness went slowly from his face. "Good. Good," he said. "Then there will be no trouble with my people. If you had spoken otherwise, if you had been indifferent, or unwilling to pursue these traitors, then I am afraid my people would have never let you leave here alive."

"Eh?" Balfour gasped.

"We do not know much about humans," Markan explained. "If these two men were willing to take our hospitality, then betray us, perhaps you would do the same. Or so my people would reason. And they would take no chances on revealing this last hiding place of our race."

"I see," Balfour said. He felt a little weak inside. He had been skirting close to death and had not known it. "I guess you will find humans much the same as any other race, some

good, some bad. In this case, we happened to pick up a couple of bad apples. All we can do is go after them."

"That's right," Lora Calhoun spoke. "We can go after them."

"I'm going," Balfour said. "You stay here."

"If you think I am going to stay here alone, you're crazy," the girl answered. "If you go, I go. If you go without me, I will follow you."

HE OPENED his mouth to protest, saw from the expression on her face that the protest would get him nowhere. "Okay," he said. "You can go, if you will leave the club behind."

She flinched but did not falter. When they went down the slope of the mountain, they were dressed in the battle garb of the blue people, consisting of a belt of knives and little else. Balfour had the ray gun he had taken from the Roum. Led by Markan, a file of twenty blue warriors went with them. At the valley of the lion lizards, the keepers there equipped them with mounts. With out-riders at front and rear, they went in single file, into the steaming jungle country, into the home of the Roum.

They found evidence that the two traders were ahead of them. "They passed this way yesterday," a hidden blue sentry told Markan. "No, I did not attempt to stop them. I thought they were our friends."

When night came they pushed on. Time was important. "We've got to find these traders before they contact a Roum patrol," Markan said. Balfour nodded silent, grim agreement. Members of two races were fighting side by side here, striving for a common goal though for different reasons. The blue people simply wished to protect the secret of their hiding place. The human, Balfour, wished to keep the secrets of space ship construction from

the Roum. They reached the edge of the plateau. Below them, hidden by darkness, was the jungle, the mass of swamp and connecting waterways that festered along the equator of Venus. Although they could see nothing, they could smell and hear plenty. The heavy air stank. There was the odor of rotting vegetation, the rank smell of stagnant water. For once, no thunderstorm was in progress. The sounds of the swamp came clearly up to them, a vast aroused hum of life, the bellowing of reptiles, the chirping of insects, now and again the prolonged *woo-ah* of the wild lion lizards.

"We will wait here for a day," Markan decided. The blue man seemed uneasy, worried, perturbed. He sent out patrols, they came back to report they had seen and heard nothing unusual. But Markan was still not at ease.

"If a Roum patrol jumps us, we'll give 'em another dose of the lion lizards," Balfour said. "I don't think they much like to tangle with those critters in the dark."

"I know they don't," the blue man said. "And we are strong enough to withstand an attack. But—" His voice trailed into fretful silence. He seemed to sense that something was wrong, but what it was, he did not know.

Something seemed to arch through the air overhead. It landed with a soft plop. A hissing sound followed. "What is that?" a blue man called sharply.

"An animal of some kind," Markan hazarded. He and Balfour moved toward the sound. It came again. This time the human caught a soft thud that preceded the soft plop. The thud came from a dark mass of trees on the left. He frowned. They had not as yet reached the spot of them a blue man yelled. "We're where the plop had sounded. Ahead

being att—" So far he got. But no farther. His voice choked off into sudden silence.

"What the hell is wrong?" Balfour said. He spoke in English. Markan did not understand him. All around them blue men were coming to their feet. Overhead a dozen objects seemed to soar, a dozen plopping sounds came. Balfour caught the whiff of an odor, knew what had happened.

"Gas!" he screamed. "Gas grenades. There's a Roum patrol hidden in—in—the—"

He was speaking English. Not a single blue man understood him. And even if they had understood him, it would have made no difference. They knew nothing of gas, had never heard of it, had never imagined that such a weapon could exist.

Balfour, getting a whiff of the stuff, enough to recognize it, had also gotten too much of it. Whether it killed its victims or merely knocked them out, he did not know. But he knew his senses were swirling. He clapped a hand over his nose, to try to keep from breathing. Too late. As he felt his knees buckle under him, he knew that he and the blue men had run head-long into an ambush, knew also that space ships were not the only human device in which the Roum were interested. They wanted earth weapons as well. They had gotten one of them. "G—as!" he croaked.

He was aware of frantic movement around him, of the frightened *woo-ah* of a lion lizard, of men choking and trying to scream, of more soft plops near him as more gas grenades landed. Then he was not aware of anything.

BALFOUR'S first dazed impression was that a couple of miniature lion lizards had moved inside his

stomach and set up housekeeping there. They hadn't been very tidy about it either and his stomach was complaining bitterly about the matter. He knew what was going to happen.

He opened his eyes, saw that he was in a boat of some kind, but he had no time to wonder where he was or how he had gotten there. He was just barely able to make it to the edge of the boat in time. When he had ejected the miniature lizards into the green water that swirled past not far below, he felt for the first time that he was going to live. But he still didn't feel that he wanted to. He collapsed into the bottom of the boat.

"That gas kinda makes you sick, don't it?" one of the two men spoke, in English. Balfour focused his glazed eyes on the speaker. It was Jorgenson. Sick as he was, he remembered who Jorgenson was. "You dirty dog," he said.

Jorgenson twisted uncomfortably. Under the whiskers, his face showed traces of red. "What the hell do you mean?" Balfour told him what he meant. "How'd you know what we had with us?" Jorgenson said, astonished. Balfour told him how he knew. "And I'm going to tell you something else too, you're the dirtiest kind of human rat there is, if you are human. You are selling a set of space ship blue prints to the Roum. Do you know what that means?"

"It means we'll get two million dollars at least!" Childress burst out. "That's what they offered us. By God, they've got to give it to us, or—" He broke off quickly.

"That's what it means to you. But what does it mean to other people?" They sat uncomfortably silent while Balfour told them what the set of plans meant, eventually, in terms of

armed, interplanetary conflict, of blazing conflict, of earth resources being strained and strained again to meet the needs of warfare, of blazing burning ships in the lanes of space, and of lost lives.

"That is what you are selling with those plans, you sons—"

"By God, you can't call me that!" Childress got to his feet, started forward, tripped and fell. Abruptly, as if all fight had been suddenly knocked out of him, he crawled back to his seat. In that moment he looked like a whipped dog. Balfour, seeing for the first time why Childress had tripped and had fallen, understood why he looked like a kicked cur.

A short length of locked chain was fastened to the man's ankle. He had apparently forgotten about it and had been reminded by the hard fall. This boat was either a convict or a slave ship of the Roum. Jorgenson and Childress were chained in place. For a moment, Balfour stared, then burst into harsh, bitter laughter.

"You sons—, you came here to do business with the Roum. And the Roum have taken your blueprints and they have taken you too. You've delivered your goods, you haven't got anything in return for them, and all you will ever get will be a knife across your throat. I never saw two men who came closer to getting exactly what was coming to them than you two."

They twisted, uncomfortably. "Aw, they won't do that," Jorgenson protested.

"The hell they won't," Balfour answered. He told them about the ship and what had happened to the crew. "The Roum lined them up and gunned them down as soon as they had the liner. And that's exactly what they will do to you, as soon as they are finished with you. Probably

they're only keeping you alive now in order to use you to translate the English words on those plans into the Roum tongue. Then, zingo!" He drew his thumb across his throat, got to his feet. He had crawled to the side of the boat when he was sick. This was the first time he had risen. Something jerked hard against his left leg. He turned startled eyes downward.

He too, was chained in place in the boat.

CHILDRESS' laugh was an unpleasant sound. Jorgenson looked a little sick. "Tough, pal. I guess we're all in the same boat." Something approaching sympathy sounded in the tall trader's voice. Balfour sat back down. "Where's Lora?" His voice seemed to come from some deep well within him.

Childress shrugged. He didn't know where Lora was and didn't care. "We didn't see her," Jorgenson said. "We didn't see anybody, except you. We came down the mountains, contacted a Roum patrol, told them what we had. They had been on the look-out for us. They brought us straight down to the water, politely took our stuff, our guns, and polite as hell, they chained us up here. A whole hell of a lot later, they brought you along. We didn't see anybody else. They're taking us to some place they call Zarglom, whatever that is. . . ."

"Capital city of the Roum," Balfour spoke.

Jorgenson nodded doubtfully. "I never actually heard of the place before."

"Not many people have. So far as I know; no human has ever been there. It's almost a lead-pipe cinch that if any human has ever been there, no one has ever gotten away alive."

Jorgenson's face showed strain. "Well, in that case, I guess we'll just be the first visitors they've entertained. No doubt we'll be quite a treat for the natives."

At the words, Balfour looked up quickly. The tone was dry but the man was amused at his own predicament. He was almost laughing. At the sight, Balfour's estimate of this tall trader underwent a sudden change. The man had courage. Balfour spoke slowly. "You know, if you hadn't sold us out, I would kinda like you."

Jorgenson's face showed embarrassment. "I made a mistake, pal, when I tried to peddle space ship plans to the Roum. But hell, I didn't know it was a mistake. I just thought the big shots on earth were trying to keep down competition by not letting the Roum have space ships. I didn't begin to know what else was tied up in the situation until you spoke your little piece a while ago. I'm in the business of making a spare dollar where I can, but I'm not in the business of selling my own people. Are we, Childress?" He dug his companion in the ribs.

"Huh? No, of course not."

"Sorry for all the bad names I called you," Balfour spoke.

"Don't mention it, pal," Jorgenson answered. "Sorry about your girl."

Balfour said nothing. The last lingering effects of the gas were going away. His stomach was feeling better. He was almost willing to be alive again, as long as he did not let himself think of Lora and of what had probably happened to her back there in the jungle night. Resolutely he put her out of his mind the way a man puts away a heart-breaking fact about which he can do nothing. . . . The leg iron chafed his ankle. Silently he cursed the Roum who had put it there, silently he cursed all

Roum. The cursing did no good, but it made him feel a little better. He looked at Jorgenson and Childress. "An hour ago I would have cut your throats, cheerfully."

"I know, pal," Jorgenson said.

"Now I am willing to shake hands with you. . . ."

If the Roum guard, looking down into the open front end of the boat, wondered at the meaning of this strange rite of the human cattle held captive, he at least did not say anything. What were the antics of these creatures to him? He did not know that the three humans shaking hands down there were in effect taking a blood oath against the Roum. And if he had known, what difference would it have made?

Three against the Roum? What idiocy was this?

THE KIND of idiocy it was the three humans discovered in the days that followed. They were taken to Zarglom, a city hidden in a valley beneath tall mountains. They were taken up the nearest mountain, along a road paved with blocks of granite. Here, near the top of this mountain, was the old fortress of Roum, their ancient stronghold. Hidden by mists and rain, the city below was usually not visible. Its main feature when it could be seen at all was a broad canal that ran through the heart of the place. In this land of mist and eternal rain, canals and rivers took the place of roads. The Roum had never really developed wheeled transportation but what they lacked in knowledge of wheeled vehicles, they more than made up in knowledge of boats. Anything that could be floated, they knew how to build. The canals of the city far below them were alive with traffic.

"Venice on Venus," Balfour said, looking down.

"The damned Roum ought to have webbed feet," Jorgenson commented.

The city lay spread below them. "If I had a slingshot and a supply of rocks, I could sure have fun here," the trader continued. "I could sling rocks off this mountain and fetch a Roum every time."

"Whoever rules this mountain, rules the Roum," Balfour agreed. The evidence indicated that the Roum themselves had recognized this interesting fact, for centuries. The mountain was a maze of fortifications, those on the lower levels were ages old. Up near the top something new had been added. Balfour looked, and looked again.

"Damn!" he said.

"What is it?" Jorgenson questioned.

"They've assembled the man-sized job up there." The single long barrel rising out of the squat blockhouse on the very top of the mountain looked a little like a telescope. But a telescope was hardly a practical instrument here on the equatorial belt of Venus, there were too many clouds, too little seeing time for that instrument. "But what would they use that weapon against?" Childress asked.

"Us," Balfour answered. "They figure we might try to stop them before they get space ships. If we send over a ship or two, maybe to drop an A or an H bomb, they've got the reception party all waiting for us."

Back in Venus Port he knew there was an Admiral who would certainly send a ship here to investigate, if given sufficient reason. "All along I've been trying to think of some way to tell old Hat where I am. He'd send a ship for sure, if I could let him know. And if he had sent a ship, it would have run straight into this. Sometimes we don't know how lucky we are when we can't do what we want to do." He thought of how the radio message he had never been able to send

would have brought a splendid ship to destruction here in the Go-roum.

"Well, we're prisoners here for sure," Jorgenson spoke. "What odds on getting out?"

Balfour shook his head. "No odds," he answered.

IMPRISONED in a cell carved out of solid rock in the lower fortress, with a guard constantly in the corridor outside and a guard detail down the corridor from them, they were placed in charge of an elderly Roum called Amurkan. The first job Amurkan gave them was to learn the Roum language. "I've kinda got a feeling it's going to take us a long time to learn this lingo," Balfour suggested. He spoke excellent Roum already but he had no intention of admitting it. The longer he took to learn the language, the more time he would have to devise ways and means of escape, he hoped.

He and the two traders learned the Roum language well enough to speak and to understand it in exactly three days. Not willingly perhaps, certainly not intentionally, but they learned it just the same. First, they were drugged. When they showed signs of resisting taking the drugs, not knowing what was intended, Amurkan called in twelve husky Roum soldiers, one for each leg and arm of the three humans. Under these conditions, they took the drug. Then each was strapped to a table, and a Roum scientist sat down beside each of them and began to explain the meaning of the words. As the drug took effect they lost consciousness. On regaining consciousness, they knew enough of the Roum language to suit Amurkan's purpose. They were put to work. As Balfour had suspected, their job was to explain and to translate the English terms on the stolen blue prints.

"Damn them, they not only stole

these prints away from me without paying for them, but now they make me explain the meaning to them," Jorgenson grumbled.

Balfour didn't want to do the job of 'translation but he knew refusal would get him nothing except a lick on the head. He hit on a happy scheme to confuse the Roum technicians. His scheme was simply to translate the English terms incorrectly, to turn millimeters into inches, to change a curve of three degrees in the outer hull of the ship into a curve of five degrees. He was pleased with himself over this idea, imagining the problems that would confront the mechanics when they tried to assemble a space ship fabricated from his instructions.

A space ship is like a jig-saw puzzle. Each part has to be built separately, then the parts have to be fitted together, each rib fitting properly in place, each stanchion meeting every wall, with all the welded parts coming properly together, with the rocket tubes in the right places, the jet steering tubes right, everything right. He could imagine the Roum being delayed for months, possibly for years, while they tried to correct the errors in dimensions he was giving them.

On such a simple thing as this the fate of an empire might stand.

The Roum would solve the problem, given time, but time was the important element. Given time, Balfour felt that he and the traders might escape.

Balfour's fine plan had been going on for two days when Amurkan entered the cell where the three men were imprisoned each night. He went straight to the point. "A deliberate effort has been made to confuse us by giving us incorrect translations. It may interest you to know that two humans can do this job as well as three. Or one can do the job. If this mis-translation occurs again, you will be given

an opportunity to cast lots to decide which of you will be with us no longer." Turning, he stalked out of the cell.

"Definite cuss, ain't he?" Jorgenson commented. He looked sidewise at Balfour. "Have you been making any mistakes, pal?"

Balfour nodded. "A few. Sorry. I didn't realize I might be getting you into trouble as much as me."

Jorgenson shrugged. "It don't matter. I've maybe made one or two mistakes myself, come to think of it. But I got an idea we had better cut it out, unless we want to draw straws to see who is the first to make the big jump into eternity. Ain't there any way we can get out of this place, pal?"

"Have you seen anything that looks like a way out?"

THE TRADER sighed and shook his head. Daily they worked with the Roum scientists. At night they were returned to this cell. Every time they left the cell, two unobtrusive Roum guards followed behind them. There was a guard outside in the corridor. They were not mistreated but they weren't given any chance to escape either.

"We'll grow long white beards before we get out of here," Childress said, despairingly.

"No, I doubt that," Balfour said. "When they no longer need us, we will stop growing beards."

As he grasped the meaning of Balfour's words, Childress began to shake. "But don't they give a damn what they do to us? After all, there are laws—"

"Roum laws. We don't come under their protection. No, I am afraid Markan is right: the only way to deal with a Roum is to hit him over the head every morning with a club. When you do that, you can get along with him the rest of the day."

The days passed. "We've been here a month," Jorgenson said.

"I know," Balfour answered.

"We've just about finished with the blue prints."

"I know that too."

"If we're going to do anything, we had better do it soon."

"Right. But what?"

The trader shook his head. "It beats the hell out of me too, pal. Even if we got away from this fort, we would just find ourselves in the jungle."

It was stay in the frying pan or jump out into the fire. "I've got a hunch we've got ourselves into a spot we're not going to get out of," Jorgenson ended.

"I wouldn't call it a hunch, I'd call it a cinch."

Three against the Roum! "I remember something I told a girl once, that the races which gave up had all been eliminated," Balfour spoke slowly. He had kept himself from thinking of Lora Calhoun. Even now he was unwilling to admit that she was the girl whom he had told to keep on trying.

"You got something in mind?" Jorgenson questioned.

"Maybe. Tonight we'll try to get the guard into our cell—" He explained what he meant. The two traders drew close and listened. "It's like shooting craps in the dark," Jorgenson said. "You can't tell when you go broke."

"Are you willing to try?"

"Sure. What can I lose but my life? And I've lost that already."

What were the odds for success? A thousand to one against? A million to one? Or was there no chance at all? Balfour felt the old feeling of giving himself up rise in him. In this case, he meant giving himself up for dead. When you give yourself up for dead, maybe you've got a chance where no chance existed before.

And maybe not.

That night in the cell Jorgenson began to writhe and groan. The guard in the corridor outside, attracted by the sound, looked in through the barred peephole in the door. "What's going on in there?" he called out.

"Nothing," Balfour answered indifferently.

"What's all the noise about?"

"He's a little sick, is all." Balfour's twisted shoulders said what difference did it make if the man was sick.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Hell, I don't know. Go away and let us rest, will you? Beat it and stop bothering us. He'll either get all right or he'll die and what difference does it make?" Again he shrugged.

The guard's face vanished from the peephole. To all appearances, he had lost interest. If a trap had been laid it was certainly well concealed. Balfour relaxed every muscle in his body, waited. Inside he was aware of a mounting tension.

THE GUARD resumed his pacing of the corridor. What did it matter to him if the human animals died? They were going to die soon, anyhow. From the guard room farther down the corridor came the sound of laughter, his comrades gambling. From the cell the groan came again. It worried the guard a little, made him uneasy. He looked through the peephole again. One of the men was stretched out on the stone floor, twisting in slow agony. The second was on his bed, apparently asleep. The third lounged against the wall.

The guard wondered. It was all right for these animals to die but was it all right for them to die on his watch? If the big shots weren't yet finished with them, and he let one die—? He thought of what Amurkan would say and do and he saw himself being transferred from this nice spot so close to the big town out to one of

the mountain patrols. Better not take any chances. When the groan came again, the guard unlocked the cell door and entered. The groans got louder then, for a moment, then went into silence.

Soon the guard came out again, quietly closing the door behind him. He looked up and down the corridor. A blue slave was just entering the guard room, carrying a tankard of hot spiced wine. The slave went hesitantly in, came hastily out, an empty tankard bouncing off his head, fled down the corridor and out of sight. The guard tucked the ray gun under his arm, moved down the corridor.

In the guard room, the lieutenant in charge, lolling at his desk, looked up and saw the guard standing in the doorway. "What are you doing—" Abruptly the lieutenant stopped speaking and straightened up. He leaned forward to get a better look at the guard standing in the doorway. Unobtrusively his hand began to move toward the weapons in the wall rack behind his chair.

A crashing sound followed, as of a strong electrical discharge. The lieutenant slumped a little in his chair but continued sitting at his desk, the almost headless body held in position by the chair. The Roum who had been gambling at the table heard the spitting discharge of the ray gun, looked up, then they too dived toward the wall rack. They could have given themselves up but the Roum had not learned how to surrender. Nor did these guards surrender. But they died. Calmly the guard in the doorway shifted the ray gun. It spat again, once, twice, three times, the silky tearing sound of the discharge rattling in the room but muffled by the solid stone outside.

When he had finished here, the guard trotted back to the door of the cell, opened it. Two men came hastily

out. Jorgenson and Childress. In the guard room they needed not more than three or four minutes to change clothes, stripping the uniforms from the dead bodies there and hastily snatching weapons from the wall rack.

"Kinda messy in here," Jorgenson said.

"Yeah," Balfour said. "It'll be messier somewhere else."

"Pal, you've hit the nail right on the head."

Balfour picked up the lieutenant's helmet from the table top, trading it for the helmet the guard had worn. He wanted the insignia of rank to be in evidence. An ordinary soldier, met by chance, might not argue with an officer. The lieutenant's insignia was boldly emblazoned on the helmet.

"Come on," Balfour said. With him as lieutenant, the three Roum fighters marched down the corridor. They would never pass close inspection; the color of their eyes would give them away, their features, most of all the fact that they only possessed five fingers would betray them. But, if they could prevent it, they did not intend to pass any inspections, close or otherwise. Once they were outside the fortress— They hadn't thought any farther than this. There was no reason to think farther. They counted their lives by the minutes now. Why bother about the problems of the tomorrow when you might not live to see it?

A blue slave appeared in the corridor ahead of them. Ever so little Balfour shifted his grip on the ray gun. At the sight of them, the slave came hastily to attention, his back against the wall, giving them plenty of room to pass. It was always wise for a blue slave to give the Roum plenty of room.

BALFOUR did not even glance at the blue man. A Roum would not bother to look at a slave. So he didn't.

Nor did the two men following him. His heart picked up in the old trip-hammer thud, then eased down a little as they passed the slave. He walked on three steps. Behind him an excited voice called:

"Bal-four!"

The accent had the twang of the language of the blue people. The slave had spoken, calling him by name. No slave here in this fortress knew his name. Balfour spun, bringing the ray gun to focus. At first he thought he was seeing a ghost. The blue slave was Markan.

"I'm nuts," Balfour said to himself. "Either I'm nuts or I got killed in that fight in the guard room and don't know it yet. No, Jorgenson, no!" He shoved aside the ray gun the tall trader was bringing to focus.

"But he's recognized us!"

At the sight of the two traders, Markan's hand had gone for the knife that should have been in his belt. No knife was there, slaves did not wear knives, at least not openly. But the knife came from some scabbard hidden in his clothes. The look on his face said he fully intended to use the knife on Jorgenson.

"Stop it!" Balfour said sharply.

Markan hesitated. "But these men—"

"Never mind about them. Why did you come here?"

"To find you, if you were still alive. To cut the throats of these two men, if they were still alive." His gaze came back to the two traders.

"They're all right, Markan. They haven't revealed the hiding place of the blue people."

Markan's face showed bewilderment. He hesitated.

"Is that what makes him so anxious with that knife?" Jorgenson spoke. "I'll say we haven't."

"In that case, I have made a mistake and I am sorry," the blue man

spoke. "I have no wish to harm them. Come with me, quickly." He moved down the corridor. The startled humans followed. In terse whispers he told them what had been planned.

He had led a small party of blue people to this city, searching for Balfour. He had learned that three strange men were imprisoned in the old fortress. "I took the place of a blue slave and came looking for you. If you were still alive, I wanted to find you and help you to safety."

"You took this risk for me?"

"You saved my life once," the blue man answered. "Remember the *gul-faw*? It was my duty to save you in turn if I could. Besides remember my feeling, my *televenir*, that your coming meant a great change in the fortunes of the blue people? I would also save you for that reason." A trace of a smile showed on the haggard face.

"A hell of a change I've made," Balfour grunted.

"There is still hope," Markan answered. He turned quickly as the sound of marching feet appeared in the corridor. Around the corner came four Room soldiers in charge of a lieutenant, the detail coming to relieve the guard over the human prisoners.

They left five dead Room there in that corridor. And one dead human, the trader, Childress. On the run, Markan led them to an outer door.

Then they were out of the fortress, out into the night.

OUTSIDE, rain was falling. In the eternal electrical display of Venus, lightning was marching across the sky in the far distance.

"I've got a boat and a crew waiting on the canal," Markan said.

"By God, it looks like we've got a chance after all," Jorgenson muttered. Something like hope sounded in his voice. "I figured we were all walking dead men, and poor old Childress was

exactly that. But now..." His voice changed, grew harsher. "Hell, I'm just kidding myself. We're still walking dead men."

"We must hurry," Markan said. "If we can get out of the main canal before the alarm is given..."

They went down the slope of the mountain on the main road. Their chance of concealment was better if they left the road but they could make better time if they stayed on it. From below them came the sound of footsteps and a man could be heard panting as if he was out of breath. Lightning raced across the sky, illuminating the runner. It was a blue man, badly wounded. Blood dripped from him, his face was contorted, one arm hung limp.

"Velandos!" Markan whispered, recognizing the runner. "What—what has happened? He is one of my crew." He called out and the runner veered toward him. Whispered words followed in the language of the blue people.

"What is it?" Balfour questioned. He didn't know what was being said but he had the feeling that something was wrong.

"He says the Roum have found our boat and have killed or captured our crew. He says he is the only one who escaped and that he came to try to warn me. He says they have set a trap around the boat and that if we go near it, we will be taken."

"Damn!" Balfour said. Chain lightning flickered in the sky. In the distance thunder rolled.

"Maybe we can steal a boat," Jorgenson said.

Again Velandos spoke, Markan translating. "They have called out all the guards and the whole city is being watched."

"Oh, well," the trader sighed. "I didn't really expect to get out of here anyhow."

"Can we get out through the city,

Markan?" Balfour spoke.

"If the Roum are on the alert, the chances are very small."

"And if we don't go through the city, what chance do we have of escaping?"

"If the Roum patrols have been alerted—and they will be—no chance at all."

Balfour laughed. The rain drops came down in a continuous patter. Distant thunder rolled. Balfour laughed again.

"Are you out of your mind?" Jorgenson spoke. "Being dead is nothing to laugh about."

"I wasn't thinking of being dead, I was thinking of being alive."

"Huh? Like what?"

"I was thinking that there is no way to escape, except up the mountain."

"Huh? And I suppose when we get to the top, we'll fly away like birds!"

"No. I had something else in mind." With thunder rolling in the distance and rain pounding around them, he told them what he had in mind. He heard Markan's startled intake of breath.

"You're a crazy fool!" Jorgenson blurted out. "You're completely out of your mind."

"Sure. Is there any other way to be now? But do you remember how you wished for a sling so you could stand on this mountain and throw rocks at the Roum down below? You claimed you couldn't miss. Remember?"

The trader was silent. Balfour turned to Markan. "What do you think of my crazy idea, my friend?"

"I think what I have always thought, that you are the means of salvation for the blue people, that you will deliver us from bondage." An odd throb of hope sounded in the blue man's voice. He gripped the ray gun he had taken from one member of the guard detail. "Lead on, my

friend. I will follow."

"Me too," Jorgenson muttered. "You're crazy but you're nutty in a way I like. Lead on, Balfour. I think we're walking straight to hell but I'll follow you anyhow."

"Then come on," Balfour said. Helping the injured Velandos, they went up the mountain.

The fortress here was a sprawling structure rising up the steep slope. They had been held prisoner in the old lower section. They went past this part of the fortress now, slipping furtively through the darkness, glad of the rain and of the darkness. The rain would drive the Roum watchers from the walls. "They haven't yet discovered that we've escaped," Jorgenson muttered. "Escaped? What the hell am I talking about?"

Balfour was silent. He was attempting now as desperate a gamble as he and Lora had faced when they tried to escape from the jungle. *Lora?* The word slipped past the guards he had imposed on his mind. He grabbed Markan by the shoulder. "Markan, w—what happened to Lora? Is—is she all right?"

"Lora?" The blue man had to think to remember who was meant by this strange word. "You mean the woman?"

"Yes. I—is she still—a—alive?" Balfour waited for the answer as he had never waited for anything before in his life. Markan had escaped after the party of blue people had been gassed. Perhaps Lora had escaped too. Perhaps she hadn't. Markan ought to know. He had not realized how much this girl meant to him until this moment when he realized that she might be still alive.

Markan started to speak.

"Shhh!" Jorgenson spoke. "Roum coming down the road."

Several centuries passed, it seemed to John Balfour, before he again had

a chance to ask about Lora Calhoun...

The Roum was coming closer. They moved furtively to the edge of the road. Lighting flared. The Roum caught a glimpse of them. He yelled a warning and dived out of sight in the bushes beside the road.

"The hell they haven't discovered we have escaped!" Balfour said. "He was looking for us. They know we've got away. Come on." Keeping to the side of the road and bending low, he ran up the mountain. The others followed. Behind them a new kind of lightning flared as a ray gun flickered. The bolt of blinding radiance went up the middle of the road like ball lightning. They dived into the shelter of the bushes.

On the walls of the fortress, lights were beginning to appear and voices were beginning to call out. Furtively, through the driving rain, they found their way up the mountainside. Below them, a search was being organized. From experience the Roum knew that anyone who escaped from here tried to go down the mountain. They reached the top unseen. Here a squat tower had been erected on the very tip of the peak...

Before the gate of the tower a single sentry marched. As the lightning flashed, they could see him there, marching back and forth along his beat.

"I'll take the sentry," Markan said. "You wait here." The blue man seemed to sink into the ground as he vanished in the darkness.

Far down the road, lights appeared. "They're coming up this time," Jorgenson said.

A guard detail was coming to join the sentry at the gate. Some Roum officer had realized there was a potential chink in their armor, a single spot where a band of daring men—or men who considered themselves al-

ready dead and hence were willing to take any chance—might cause inconceivable damage.

The sentry continued his pacing in front of the gate. His duty was to stay there, to shoot first if anyone approached and to ask questions afterward. He reached the end of his post, turned and started to walk back in the other direction.

A figure rose from the ground behind him, a knife flashed downward.

Markan, with keys taken from the sentry, was already unlocking the entrance to the squat tower when they arrived. A split second later, the heavy door swung aside. They were in.

ABOVE THEM, enclosed now within a protective canopy, like a telescope in its mount, the huge ray tube pointed its snout upward. There was a seat for the operator, a bank of control buttons in front of him, a telescopic aiming sight. The whole tube could be swung to point in any direction, could be elevated to point straight up, or lowered to aim down the slopes of the mountain.

Inside were three Roun scientists, including Amurkan. Never in all the violent history of this bloody race had there been three more surprised Roun. They were unarmed.

"No doubt you will be glad to explain to us exactly how this equipment works," Balfour said gently.

"We will not!" Amurkan answered hotly.

"Ah. Some time back, when some of the translations seemed to be wrong, there was some talk of casting lots," Balfour continued.

Amurkan's face lost a shade of its ruddy color. He said nothing.

"I wonder— How do you Roun cast lots?" He lifted the ray gun that he carried.

"I'll show you," Amurkan said hastily. "About the *arthrim*."

"That's nice of you. If I were you,

I wouldn't make any mistakes."

"There won't be any mistakes."

Markan was examining the huge ray tube, his eyes glistening. "Brother, oh brother!" he was whispering.

"Would you like to have the seat of honor—" Balfour gestured toward the metal chair of the operator, "—while our good friend, Amurkan, tells you what buttons to punch?"

"Would I?" the blue man shouted.

The hurrying Roun patrol had not yet reached the squat tower on top of the mountain when the protective canopy was swung aside and the great tube began to shift its position.

"Somebody is in there working the *arthrim*!" the lieutenant in charge said. *Arthrim* was their word for the great ray on the mountain top. It represented the perfection of their genius, their greatest work. With it installed and ready for operation, they felt safe from attack by that strange race that had come across space, in ships the like of which they had never seen. With the *arthrim* in position no ship would ever attack them, or fleet of ships, not successfully. . . .

The lieutenant was not worried because the *arthrim* had been uncovered. He assumed the scientists inside were getting it ready for use against the escaped prisoners, if the need arose, although such use was like using a lion lizard to crush a fly. The lieutenant was not worried even when the great tube came into line with the road. He didn't see the lighting flash from it.

The lieutenant and the guard detail vanished, disappeared, their volatilized bodies flashing into vapor and becoming a part of the suddenly boiling air, of the howling wind rushing to get away from the blast. The very surface of the road itself was melted in spots, scorched far down its length. Where the road veered, the blast went straight ahead. Trees in the path of

that vicious stream of force burst into flame, rocks turned red as their surface turned into molten lava and tried to flow.

"Holy hell!" Jorgenson exclaimed watching.

"Exactly," Balfour said. "That is the weapon they were going to mount in a space ship, eventually in a fleet of such ships."

The trader choked and swallowed, "You should have knifed me rather than let me trade blue prints to the Roum."

"I would have knifed you, if I had had the choice and the chance," Balfour answered.

Markan swung the ray tube down to cover the city. His shout rose: "A club for the head of all the Roum alive!"

Lining up the sights, he pressed the firing stud.

FAR BELOW him he could see the main canal. Like a silver arrow, it stretched straight away from him. It was on this canal that he lined up the sights.

Brrrrroooooom!

When the blasting torrent of energy struck it, the water in the canal was turned instantly into steam. A tremendous wave of mixed water and steam was flung upward from each side of the canal, to fall as hot splashing rain over Zarglom, capital city of the Roum.

Markan's shout lifted up again. "Every morning at sunrise, we'll boil that canal dry, as an object lesson to the Roum."

Centuries, generations, of hate boiled in him. Now in this night, now in this moment, all the oppressions the blue people had suffered were being paid off. Now the revenge of the blue people spoke in tones of thunder from the top of the mountain, spoke with the Roum's own weapon, roaring

down at them that the day of vengeance was at hand. A hastily summoned force of soldiers appeared far below. Markan swung the weapon to cover them. They went away like exhaust gases spurting from a jet engine. Markan swung the weapon up and down the mountainside, sweeping away all cover, blasting every outcropping of rock, every grove of trees on the lower levels. The old fortress below him seemed to explode outward as he turned the beam on it. In tones of thunder, the voice of the blue people spoke in the night.

"We've won a stalemate," Jorgenson said. "We can hold this hill for a time. But tomorrow—"

His tone was dark with foreboding. They controlled the mountain. They could control it forever. But tomorrow—

"There's bound to be radio equipment somewhere in this tower," Balfour said. "I've got enough technical skill to make the necessary frequency changes. If Amurkan will only show us where it is—"

Amurkan would show them.

Summoned by radio, the space cruiser arrived just at dawn. As the first rays of the sun poked into the mists of the Go-roum, she came nosing in over the peaks. If she had appeared here the day before she would have been blasted out of the sky, but this day she could come in safety. She carried an Admiral. After the ship landed, he and his aides came toiling up the long slope to the top of the mountain. They looked at the scenes around them as if they did not believe their eyes. Balfour went out to meet them. Admiral Hatridge had to look twice to make certain he knew this man, then he burst into startled words.

"John Balfour, I thought you were on the way to earth. What in the name of heaven have you been doing

here? What happened? What caused all this destruction? And—"

"I've been working with some special police in this area, making arrangements to help them keep the peace."

"Special police?" the astonished Admiral gasped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Balfour gestured toward Markan, standing in the door of the tower. "The blue people. They'll make a dandy police force for this area. As soon as we can get them installed in force on the mountain top—which means as soon as you send that cruiser to bring a regiment here from their homeland—we'll have a group of policemen here who will guarantee that the Roum keep the peace in the only possible way, by hitting them over the head regularly every morning."

Admiral Hatridge listened. Perhaps this was not the way the high UN administrators would solve the problem, but as he saw the ray tube and got a picture of the destruction it had caused and realized what would have happened if this weapon had been turned against his cruiser, he didn't much care what high policy makers thought of his decision. "I'll have them here within the day, if you will only tell me where I can get them."

Balfour told him. Velandos went with the cruiser, to show them the way to the hiding place of the blue people.

Down in Zarglom, the astounded Roum looked apprehensively up the mountain.



THE CRUISER returned before nightfall, to set down in a heavy landing. The vessel was loaded to the gills with blue people.

She came with them. Balfour saw her coming up the mountain. Not until then did he remember the question Markan had not had time to answer,

nor he to ask again. Balfour turned to the blue man asking another question. "Those gas bombs must have knocked you out too, Markan. How did you manage to escape from the Roum patrol?"

The blue man showed signs of embarrassment. "They did knock us out. We escaped because—well, another group of our people was following us. I had instructed them to follow in case—"

"Eh? You had said nothing of a second group?"

"No. We were not quite sure how far we could trust you. The second group was to take care of any emergency that might arise, if you attempted to betray us."

"I see," Balfour said grimly. The blue man's embarrassment grew. "The second group took care of the Roum patrol. It was simply that we did not know how far we could trust you humans. You will forgive me, my friend, for lacking faith?"

"Since your lack of faith saved her for me, I will forgive you," Balfour answered. He gestured toward the woman coming up the slope. She was not wearing the yellow dress. She was in the uniform of a blue warrior but there was no mistaking her identity.

"Eh?" Markan said. He did not understand. The intricacies of human interpersonal relationships were beyond him.

The girl came up. She ignored the presence of the admiral, of the watching blue people, came straight to Balfour. "They told me you were still alive. I didn't believe it."

"I wasn't sure of it myself, until right now. Want to pinch me, to make certain I'm not a ghost?" He held out his arm. Gravely she pinched the flesh. He grinned. "Turn about is fair play," he said, and watched the color come into her face.

Something was missing about her,

something was changed. He couldn't tell what it was. Finally he realized what it was. "The club. You forgot it?"

"Did I?" she answered. "Maybe, when I heard you were alive, I left it behind intentionally?"

"Hey? What? Huh?"

POLARIZED BEE-LINE . . .

By CHARLES RECOUR

THE MORE scientists delve into the mystery of the insect world, the more they come up with ideas apparently lifted directly out of the modern world of physics and chemistry. The ability of bats to use sonic radar, the peculiar mating calls of insects involving the generation of radio-frequency energy, and a number of other strange techniques are now joined by the discovery of the mysterious sensing element which enables the bee to fly his proverbial "bee-line".

A bee uses the light in the sky as his guide-line, but not with ordinary optical seeing as the method. Instead, he possesses two weird organs shaped much like tooth-picks, called "ommatidia" which have the unusual property of sensing the planes of polarized light in the sky. As everyone acquainted with rudimentary science knows, light from the sun comes to us with the plane of its electrical field oriented for the most part at random. But numbers of these random orientations form some sort of order, "planes of polarization" we call them.

A bee flies in a straight line, wiggling its body as it does so, and thus senses these peculiar planes of polarization which give it its navigating position. In addition, even though the sun may be hidden by heavy overcasts, the "ommatidia" are capable of detecting the light. Thus, at no time is the bee blind to his major guide, save at night when he's in the hive anyway.

The very discovery of this unusual method of navigation suggests to physicists that here might lie the kernel of a new idea for navigating by humans. When the sun is hidden and neither sun nor star shots can be taken, some instrument might be devised which could sense this polarized light just as does the bee.

It seems funny that Nature has anticipated Man in so many physical matters. The Sun is the original Atomic Bomb. Bees fly by polarized light, and bats use radar. What next?

Gravely she faced him. "I guess I don't have to be an expert at *televenir* to know what's on your mind right now," she said.

He felt his face turn again into a grin. "And you without your club!" he answered.

THE END

"YOU RASCAL, YOU"

By A. T. KEDZIE

ABOUT THE only ones who are happy when they hear that old saw about, "...I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal, you" are the funeral directors of America. With no intention of impugning the sacred services for the dead, it is interesting to take a scientific look at one of the oldest of social customs, that of burying the dead with pomp and circumstance.

We think that we're far removed from primitive man and that only the aborigines practice weird social customs—we like to think that, anyhow. But it's far from the truth. As a matter of fact, when it comes to disposing of our dead, we are basically as primitive and superstitious as any race alive.

A recent scientific survey has been made of the practices of Americans in disposing of their dead and some interesting trends have been noted. For one thing, the habit of "viewing" the dead is on the decline. This somewhat barbaric custom of gazing at the dead in the coffin is more and more a custom of only the poorer economic groups. Many people now restrict the viewing of the body to the most intimate members of the family or forbid it entirely, carrying on the funeral service completely with a closed coffin.

The modern, efficient, sane and sanitary practice of cremation is also gaining favor. There is an economic value to this, too. We spend more on funerals than we do on patients in hospitals! Very often the entire savings and insurance are used in this way. Cremation eliminates this costly procedure and also takes care of the fact that burial ground is becoming scarce.

Traceable perhaps to superstition, the costly customs are really a throwback to the extreme veneration of the dead that was practiced by primitive man, and which is still practiced by native tribes in remote regions of the world. It is satisfying to discover that there is a more logical trend today.

Whatever the trend, it is bad news for the undertakers!

ASIATIC ARMAGEDDON?

By
LEE OWEN

THE LIGHTS burn brightly in the strategic military offices of the members of the United Nations, who jointly with the United States are considering the dropping of "brimstone and hellfire" upon the Chinese Communist aggressors. As coldly and as analytically as a scientist examining a bug under the microscope, these strategists are weighing the value of dropping atomic bombs upon Chinese and Manchurian cities. Already they have come to the conclusion that the use of such bombs against troops in the field would be simply wasteful.

It is suggested that we possess in the neighborhood of four hundred to a thousand atomic bombs—pure guesswork, of course—and we can make them at the rate of ten to twenty per month. In light of the possibility of a world-wide holocaust, the strategists ask "would it be wise to risk using what may prove more precious than gold?" But the major deterrent is not even this thought, but the simple

fact that for the most part the relatively small Chinese industry is so widely dispersed and oriented in such small units, that the effectiveness of the bomb in hurting the Chinese war potential is practically nil.

Against what some years ago we were fond of calling "the yellow peril", even the might and power of the atomic bomb seems helpless. The hordes of Asia are so vast in numbers and operate at such a low social and industrial potential, that Man's mightiest weapon seems ineffective against them. Their weakness is their strength. Life means little or nothing in Asia. It is their most expendable resource.

It is indeed ironic to think that the highly organized West is hampered in its military actions—despite its possession of the most powerful weapons and machines—by the simple fact that it is opposed by an endless stream of expendable, rifle-carrying bodies. Are western man's machines making him vulnerable instead of invincible? Only time will give the answer.

By
OMAR BOOTH

VIDEO SCIENCE - FICTION?

NOW THAT television's had a few years tucked under its belt, it's a good time to examine some of the things it has essayed. TV is a wonderful medium, but so far it has not attempted to enter the science-fiction field with any seriousness. True, there are a number of juveniles of the Buck Rogers, Captain Video variety floating through the ether, but these are strictly children's plays, having no connection with s-f as we think of that esoteric subject.

In fact, it's almost embarrassing to watch some of the shows, for in their worst aspects they offer to establish terrible tastes in the minds that observe them. They bear absolutely no relation to modern s-f as it appears in the magazines. So we may safely say that s-f hasn't hit the video screens yet.

Fantasy, however, is another matter. There have been some superb presentations of fantasy both in film and on the TV stage. In fact, it is not difficult to find a fantasy-type program being staged quite often. Many legitimate plays employing fantasy elements are used, and numerous horror-mystery shows are fond of the genre. A number of whimsical shows of the puppet variety, particularly Kukla, Fran and Ollie, manage to purvey fantasy superbly and with invariably good results. The particular show cited unquestionably gives forth with excellent fantasy of the Alice in Wonderland-Peter Pan type, and often even of the good s-f variety.

What accounts for the wealth of fan-

tasy and the paucity of s-f in television? The answer of course is obvious; fantasy requires hardly any props, or at least only the simplest type—s-f, on the other hand, necessitates the most lavish sort of settings and equipment and stage properties. As long as this is true, we can't look to TV itself to provide us with science-fiction. It is simply not possible to create another world, a rocket, or strange beings within the limitations of an ordinary TV stage.

What is the answer to that problem, especially since science-fiction is becoming so popular? A number of recent films put out by Hollywood give that answer. Science-fiction on television via screen presentation and treatment is the obvious solution. We may be sure that such plans are in the making. Since the film maker is capable of reproducing any scene no matter how weird, science-fiction is ripe for the Hollywood treatment and we know from recent experience, that Hollywood is fully aware of the fact.

So there is hope. It won't be for a while yet; until Hollywood and television make their peace, we won't have science-fiction on our video screens. But the public demand is increasing. Soon they'll have to bow to the inevitable, and we'll see plenty of s-f. It is, however—and the writer believes this completely—almost a certain fact, that the best way of getting the thrills of science-fiction, movies or video, is still through the medium of the printed page—preferably your favorite magazines, at that!

READER'S PAGE

CONSISTENTLY GOOD, THAT'S US

Dear Editor:

In your latest issue of FA you have a horror story. I suppose this means that you are going to make it a habit to have a horror story in every issue. If so, I suggest that you use Virgil Finlay on the stories. He has a style better suited to that kind of story than any of your other artists.

Your cover stories are consistently good. Last month's sequel to "The Face Beyond the Veil" was *better* than the original story. And the cover was *very* good. I had not read "Face" *before*, but that cover made me so interested that I sat down and read both of them.

This issue and "The Sword of Ra" has been a small letdown to me. In the first place, I expected St. Reynard's novelette to be at least a short novel. And not only that, but the novelette was longer by approximately 5,000 words (I haven't checked to see if that is true) and yet it is not as good as "Justice of Tor". The cover this issue was good, in fact very good, but not as good as last month's cover. The same for the cover stories.

I wish you would get longer cover stories. Not that the present ones aren't good, quite the contrary, they're very good. But just think how much better they would be if they were longer stories. So how about it, huh?

I like your policy of running a few extra drawings with the feature story. It helps to brighten up the pages. And how about a "Coming Next Issue" department, or at least a hint in the editorial or an advertisement at the end of the feature story.

Edmond B. Swiatek is a brush-name (since he's an artist, it's not a pen-name) for Arnold Kohn, isn't he?

"Tink Takes Over" is a very cute short. I breezed through it. Some stories you can breeze right through in a few minutes, and others you have to go slower, but the enjoyment element is the same. It's all in the writer's style. Costello has a very easy-to-read style.

Well, I hope this has been an interesting letter.

Terry Carr
134 Cambridge Street
San Francisco 12, California

Ed Swiatek is definitely not a pseudonym for Arnold Kohn—although the two are very

good friends. Ed is a very much alive—and very personable—capable young artist...Ed.

DROP OUR ADS?

Dear Les,

Greetings, Earthman. After scanning the newsstands for two years, I finally perceived with joy that there was a copy of a mag called FANTASTIC ADVENTURES thereon. Hurriedly I plunked down 25c and shoved said mag under my coat.

On reaching my domicile, I began to read the first Canadian issue (that I've seen anyway) here for said two years. Is this situation permanent? When do we fen see AMAZING STORIES out here?

FA was just as good as I remembered it, and you can count me among your regular readers from now on.

I've forgotten most of your illustrators but remember Rod Ruth clearly. Used to illo Toffee, no? Forgot that you had Finlay working for you. Jones seems to be a good illustrator. Krupa needs a brushup course.

Now that the ban is down on the issues, can we fen hope to get your mags regularly? Why did RAP leave?

Say can't you get rid of those ads? I know that you've had the darn things ever since you started your mags, but why can't you get rid of them?

When can we expect trimmed edges?

I thought that you had 160 pages in your mags. Wha happened?

Lastly, why the heck can't you get rid of some of those feature things? (Do I hear cries from some fen?) I don't care too much for them.

How about some stories (novels) by Hamilton, et al? I still remember a story I read about a lady being turned into a tiger. Then there was the one about the sphinx in Egypt being a tomb holding weapons for the rise of Egyptian power. Stories like the above two made me enthusiastic about the mag.

Though this is my first letter to your mag, as long as I get issues, you'll get my letters. Just keep putting in good stories.

Are there any fen around that would like to correspond?

Douglas Mitchell
Ste. 11-406 Notre Dame Avenue,
Winnipeg, Manitoba,
Canada

Both AMAZING STORIES and FAN-

TASTIC ADVENTURES are now available in Canada, and we welcome you as a regular reader.

Rod Rutl is one of several artists who've illustrated *Toffee*. Among the others are Henry Sharp, Bob Jones, Harold MacCauley.

Ray Palmer is now publishing his own magazine, *OTHER WORLDS*.....Ed.

AND NOW IT'S FORT

Dear Mr. Shaffer:

Since your readers seem to be intelligent and thinking creations, I would like to put a question to them. What is with this Fort man?

He wrote about dragon fights in the sky, which he claimed was a gelatinous substance in which everything was stuck. Did he really believe that stuff or was he just trying to pull someone's leg (and make a little money on the side)? Are there any stf fans who think that the Earth is not a planet and that we are really the playthings of some omniscient and omnipresent being? Now, I consider myself as open-minded as the next person but that strains my credulity. When I first heard of Fort, I thought he was generally considered a crackpot, but now I am not so sure. It seems there is even a Fortean society which contains some V.I.P.'s.

There is something else I am curious about. Supposing that our transportation was based upon a car in which we were converted to cosmic rays. When the beam which the car projects before it strikes a solid substance, we and the car are changed back to matter. Would we be able to see things outside the car while we were travelling (as' cosmic rays)?

This situation was used by Ames in his novel, "Victims of the Vortex", which was printed in an old issue of AS.

I still haven't heard of any Fort Wayne fans. What's the matter, Fort Wayner's? Are you just shy? Well, come out from behind those stf mags and let's get acquainted. It sure does get lonesome trying to discuss stf with myself—and getting silly answers, most of the time!

I have saved my comments on the March issue for the last. Cover—gorgeous gal and handsome hero. Need I say more? Yes? Okay, I like it. As for the stories, they were all very readable with some—"Social Obligations", Costello's novel, and "The Master Ego", taking top honors.

As they say, every month FA gets better and this month you read like next month.

I guess that is all for this month. I'll be waiting impatiently for the next issue of FA.

Until then, I am still your fan-atic.

Mrs. Marlyn McCann
1015 High Street
Fort Wayne 7, Indiana

Well, OK fans—what've you got to tell Mrs. McCann about Fort?.....Ed.

SHE LIKED IT...

Dear Editor:

I am in a quandry. I don't know where to place P. F. Costello's "Secret of the Flaming Ring" on my list for the March issue of FA. Until the end, it was very good. In fact, I thought it might be first. Never mind all the science-fantasy angle—the story of a man who is literally held together by hunks of iron, and continues to live—that would make a grade A novel. I particularly enjoyed the Fate that made a guy with every right to be cynical and hate humanity, be the good St. Nick of the strip-tease girls. But then when you put in those last ten or so pages!! Need I say more? Oh well, it still was enjoyable reading.

Now to the Reader's Page. First of all, I'd like to clarify something for Judy Sanow, if I may (and can). In the first part, the caveman was not the last on Earth, but rather, he was finally deserted. The second one was a somewhat thinly disguised Noah, and I'm sure you know the story. The sailor was not the last man on Earth, but instead just the survivor from some island. However, there was no one within miles of him. All in all, though, like several others, I, too, could write the whole story from the first line, it was quite well-written.

Could you please tell Paul Ganley, that just reading science-fantasy does not make one teen-ager any better than those who don't. I don't feel though that I have to waste the time here to give him a rebuttal, for almost every teen-ager who reads his letter will feel as I do. And I've gotten straight A's, too, but I don't give the credit to science-fantasy. Just ask him to take some time off from feeling superior, and speak to a few of us teens. However, his contest idea is good.

Now to look at the stories: In first place—"Social Obligation", by Roy L. Clough, Jr. It was wonderful. It was too true though. Did you ever see what happens when anyone tries to introduce something new? Look it up in history if you have any doubts.

Second place—"Secret of the Flaming Ring", by P. F. Costello. That I discussed before in this letter, so 'nuff said.

Third—"Let's Do It Again". That's another side to 1984. Everything too perfect.

Fourth—"The Master Ego", by Peter Worth. That sentence on the top of the first page was misleading. Only personally, I prefer the world as it is than in a Utopia under a focus.

And tying for fifth and last place are "Pink Wind", by Frances M. Deegan, and "Death Has Green Eyes", by John W. Jakes. Both were too short.

All in all, all of the stories were very good.

Oh yes, the illos. Hurrah, hipp hip, three cheers, and all that stuff. They all actually illustrated the stories they were supposed to. And my vote for the best letter goes to George C. Jenkins.

Arline E. Gingold
60 Elm Street
Ellenville, N.Y.

...BUT SHE DIDN'T

Sirs:

The March, 1951 issue was just finished by yours truly, and I had to wonder why, with nice stories like "Secret of the Flaming Ring", "Pink Wind", and "Master Ego", you had to spoil it all by including the same number of trash. Three good—three bad. Maybe that's being hard on you. Maybe only three bad out of six is the best any editor can do.

But I've seen you do better! Some gimmicks are used over and over, but the story can conceal the use of the gimmick if it's half way good. A story like "Death Has Green Eyes" (which aside from being sickeningly old was written in garbled fashion, anyhow) is a sad blot on your mag's fair record. It didn't help your spotted page a bit to throw in "Let's Do It Again" and "Social Obligation" too!

My gripe is—if the writer can't do better than to make his story run around in

circles like the "Do It Again" effort, he should await a better idea—not grind out such a horrible mess. As for the other two—John W. Jakes just played up a silly notion into an insane idea. His hero would better be psychoanalyzed than to crash FA, and Ray L. Clough, Jr. had better study human nature a bit longer before he writes again. In the Middle Ages, people acted that way, but they never will again. A man may murder, a mob may lynch, but only for gain or sex or a mistaken ideal. They won't kill a man for inventing, since witchcraft is no longer feared.

I hope next issue's batting average improves!

Gwen Cunningham
8519 MacArthur Blvd.
Oakland 5, California

Lennie in "Social Obligation" was not killed for merely inventing. He was killed because the people were afraid he was a forerunner of the past—because he was bringing back an enlightenment that had already brought disaster......Ed.

HE WANTS US BETTER THAN
TERRIFIC

Dear Ed:

I can't honestly say that this is another



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of those first letters you seem to receive continually, because I wrote you a few years ago when I first started reading stf. I guess that letter wound up in the trash bucket though, because it sure never got into print.

However, here I am back again. It sure took me long enough to regain my courage, though—with some more comments on our favorite mag.

I have not quite finished reading the last issue, but so far, I am sorry to say, I have not found it up to FA standards. Now before you hop down my throat, I don't mean the stories weren't any good. On the contrary, they were good enough for most magazines, but not for FA. Of the ones I have read so far, I seem to like "The Pink Wind". Not a bad little yarn. I guess I liked it because it is slightly off the beaten track. The art work was good as usual.

I wonder if I might be allowed to slip in a request for some correspondents. I'm a very cruel guy—I like to make the postman work for his money. As it is, the only people who write to me are on my draft board. Listen you femme fans, you're included in that request, I'm not a bit prejudiced. I always did say there was plenty of room on this tired old planet for both guys and gals.

I'm afraid my time has run out, so I'll have to leave you now. However, I'll be seeing you again next month.

L. William Mohs
937 Fulton Street
Brooklyn 16, N. Y.

You don't need an especial amount of courage to write to us. We're always looking forward to getting letters from our readers.....Ed.

TRADERS' MARKET

Dear Ed:

Quite a nice cover for the March issue. The girl looks like a tossed salad. Nice looking, though.

Your editorial was interesting to read. If for no other reason than it's your first one.

It's interesting to note that the quality of your stories was best during 1948 and 1949. The first issues of 1950 found FA approaching what is known as a rut. You're still there, by the way. I thought you were going to pull out when the November ish hit the stands, but then came the December ish. Puh-leeze let's have FA back to the high standard it held during '48 and '49. 'Nuff of that.

The March ish was slightly improved over the Feb. one. By the way, the dressing up of the scientific articles looks neat. The illo on page 89 was the best in the book. (By Finlay, natch!) All the stories were readable for a change.

Now to the Reader's Page: Earl Newlin, Jr.—I agree. FA ought to take out

those space fillers and substitute something written by fans. It would be cheaper, to say the least. Most of them would do it for nothing, just for the prestige of seeing their "baby" in FA.

George C. Jenkins—I side with you myself. The only reprint mags that hurt the pro writers' market are the stf ones. Not the fantasy mags. So far, every stf reprint mag I've read has contained nothing but hack.

The Losing Battle Department: 1. Lengthen the reader's page. Show us you have more than six letter writers. 2. Get a "Toffee" story from Myers. 3. Age old cry, trimmed edges.

Anybody want to trade back issues for stamps?

Best letter last month was by George Jenkins.

Jan Romanoff
26601 South Western
Lomita, California

A FIRST LETTER

Dear Editor:

I haven't been reading AS and FA for very long and so this is my first letter, and so I hope I don't say anything improper or wrong.

First of all, I'd like to say this: I agree with Ralph Bailey on the advertisements (he wrote in the February issue). After all, I am sure that most of the readers are in good health and even if their false teeth are loose and their hair is falling out, if they haven't found a way by now to prevent it, they probably never will. I know that advertisements are a source of income, but can't they be something for us teen-agers?

Boy, the story I thought was really good was "Secret of the Flaming Ring". It was written by P. F. Costello. Also, "Death Has Green Eyes" by John W. Jakes. I thought that was rather weird—it was good though.

I've looked through your magazine and have found many short articles but never any on the different planets. I don't mean anything schoolish, but something interesting about life on Mars and Venus.

One thing more, could you tell me when the magazines are issued? Thank you very much.

Sandra Hinckley
5439 Fisher Place
Seattle, Washington

Our magazines are issued monthly. We'll see what we can do about future fillers regarding life on Mars and Venus for you, Sandra.....Ed.

BURROUGHS FOR SALE!

Dear Editor:

I have some books to sell by Edgar Rice Burroughs. I have some rare ones—"The Moon Maid and the Mucker", "The

Mad King", "The Bandit of Hell's Bend", "The Cave Girl" and "Pirates of Venus". I also have many Tarzan books as well as some of the Martian series. How about printing some of Burroughs' excellent short stories.

Jack Cohen
78 Avenue C
New York 19, N. Y.

To our knowledge, there are no available unpublished short stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs.....Ed.

SCIENCE IN SCIENCE-FICTION TOO?

Dear Les:

You have restored my faith in editors (the you is plural). After reading the answer to the escape velocity question a few issues back, I wondered what the devil happened to ye ed. Now everything is explained.

However, I disagree. Emphatically. About the importance of science in science-fiction, that is. I don't want a lot of gadgets and gizmos in the stories, but neither do I want to see science kicked into a dark corner and used merely as a background for cosmic kissing. I also want my science to be logical and either known scientific facts and theories of today or interpolations of these.

Many authors who are writing today don't have the faintest idea of the difference between a spectrophotometer and a cyclotron. Many editors don't either. (Nothing personal meant.) Now is the time for all good fans to rally 'round before science-fiction becomes simpl-fiction or something similar.

This feud between the teen-agers and the more "mature" gentlemen who keep cropping up every once in a while amuses me. I figure that if the teenagers read the mag and want to write, let them. I enjoy the letters whether written by babes-in-arms or Ole Doc Methuselah himself. They often have better plots than the stories themselves.

Speaking of stories, I may as well list my opinions of same. I'll just line them up in order of preference and leave the comments for later epistles. (Better duck, ed, for they'll be coming.)

- "The Master Ego"
- "Secret of the Flaming Ring"
- "Social Obligation"
- "Pink Wind"
- "Let's Do It Again"
- "Death Has Green Eyes"

Concerning Ganley's contest idea, you may register my vote as being for it. My vote for the best letter goes to one W. Paul Ganley for making ye ed swallow his words, whether spoken as an experiment or not.

Willy Markham
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FIRE-PROOF SILVER

By MERRITT LINN

STERLING silver, which by law must contain ninety-two and a half per cent pure silver metal, is easily subject to tarnishing by both chemical agents and heat. When polished and new, such metal looks beautiful, which accounts for its high demand, but it stains so easily that maintaining it is a terrible chore. In some instances when exposed to great heat, sterling silver is corroded and stained in an almost impossible to clean fashion. This is because the copper alloy which makes up the rest of its constituents is oxidized right in the body of the silver.

English scientists have discovered a unique and logical way of combatting this. They alloy a small amount of aluminum with the copper before preparing the sterling. Then when heat affects the metal it oxidizes a small amount of the aluminum on the surface. Aluminum oxide in thin films is transparent and extremely resistant to further corrosion. As a consequence the new silver sterling alloy is impervious to further attack and hence retains its fascinating sheen.

Metallurgists are discovering more and more ways of making metals useful. They are producing new alloys to meet mechanical and electrical problems all the time. At present a group of metallurgists is engaged in perhaps the major metallurgical problem of our time—iron corrosion. Preventing iron and steel from rusting and corroding, without adding chromium and nickel, is indeed a tough problem. So far they haven't succeeded in overcoming it. Heat treatment, other alloying materials, chemical baths—all these things fail to make steel and iron corrosion-proof. But it is really only a matter of time. Unquestionably somehow scientists will learn the method. After all, tremendous economic losses occur each year through simple rusting. Eliminating that rusting would effectively double our steel output to two hundred million tons a year!

**MEN BEHIND
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(Continued From Second Cover)

used to spin at night around the fireplaces, when I would thrill at the stories of epic battles and phantom superstitions of the old Viking days.

The call to far-off places had always been strong within me—the lure of the distant horizon which used to enthrall me on the Norway waters

years ago—so after I graduated from college, I got a job with a large construction company which sent me out to Japan, where all my youthful idealism and knowledge went into building bridges.

I'll skip the years following December 7, 1941. They were not pleasant. Physically—they resulted only in a stiff left knee. After the war, my old job was open for me. Much to my own surprise—as well as that of everybody who knew me—I turned down the job. I was filled with a restlessness I couldn't explain—the five years of war—perhaps seeing the very bridges I'd helped build now being blown up by bombs I was helping to drop.

Whatever it was, I had no desire to remain on in the Far East. I came back to the States and spent a year working on my brother's farm in Wisconsin, but that didn't help much either.

So I took a job on a tramp freighter with the half-formed idea of eventually winding up in Norway. About six months later, I had quit my job and was visiting with my relatives in and around Haugesund and Kopervik. Occasionally, for some extra money, I went out fishing with the men—but mostly, I just lay around taking it easy.

In a small village like ours, and even in the port towns, a foreign visitor creates quite a furor—particularly in my case, since most of the population were related to me. I found myself answering so many questions about what life was like in America and Japan, and about my travels, that just as a gag, I tried writing a series of short articles relating various adventures.

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who serialized them daily for a week —I really felt I'd hit the top mark. Fisherman — engineer — traveler — now author. I took a small house in Haugesund where I remained for over two years, working as a reporter on the same newspaper which had made me a professional writer for the first time. During these two years, I tried my hand at fiction—but each story came back with a very polite, but firm, rejection slip. Actually, they were pretty bad efforts. I was trying to tie in my aptitude for fantasy, with the modern tragedy of Norway—and these first stories were a hash.


Now, I decided it was time to come back to the United States and do something about getting myself settled. I booked passage and left on the next available ship.

But the legends of my ancestral home came along with me. To me as an adult, they were even more vivid and real than when I'd heard them as a youngster.

Strolling on deck, day after day, watching the never-changing horizon, the opening for "Whom the Gods Would Slay" came to me. About half way through the voyage I went into my stateroom, and emerged only when the boat docked. But I had about 20,000 words finished, of a 35,000-word novelette in which I believed implicitly. The remainder of the story was written in a small hotel room right off New York's own Times Square.

I'm going back to Wisconsin now, and take up my bachelor quarters until such time as the right girl comes along. And there'll be no more building bridges for me. From now on, I hope to build words—into successful stories.

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